



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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### **Situation Update**

July 13, 2018 / KHRG #17-60-S1

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## **Hpapun Situation Update: Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District, March to May 2017**

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*This Situation Update describes events occurring in Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun (Mu Traw) District during the period between March and May 2017, including information about recent military activity, a protest organised by internally displaced people, landmines, education, and health.*

- *On March 26<sup>th</sup> 2017, soldiers from Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #351 and Infantry Battalion (IB) #72 set fire to seven hill farms while trying to clear vegetation around a vehicle road. Because of this fire, some villagers in Pla Hkoh and Yeh Mu Plaw village tracts were unable to cultivate paddy on their land and faced food shortages.*
- *On May 15<sup>th</sup> 2017, 615 Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in Lu Thaw Township held a non-violent protest in Thee Nga Plaw place, Pla Hkoh village tract. They called for the Tatmadaw to withdraw from their army camps so that they could return to their villages and resume cultivating their lands.*

### **Situation Update | Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District (March to May 2017)**

*The following Situation Update was received by KHRG in June 2017. It was written by a community member in Hpapun District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor 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 Hpapun District, including two incident reports, 192 photographs and five video clips.<sup>2</sup>*

#### **Introduction**

This Situation Update describes events occurring in Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun [Mu Traw] District during the period between March and May 2017, including information about recent military activity, a protest organised by internally displaced people, landmines, education, and health.

#### **Tatmadaw location**

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<sup>1</sup> KHRG trains community members in southeast 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 southeastern 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.

Tatmadaw [army camps] in Saw Mu Plaw village tract are located in Paw Khay Hkoh, Der Kyu, Hpa Gaw Lo, and Wah Klay Tu areas.

Tatmadaw [army camp] in Ler Mu Plaw village tract is based in Htaw Mu Pleh Meh area, and Tatmadaw [army camps] in Hkay Pu village tract are situated in Hkay Pu, T'May Hta, and Khaw Daw Hko areas.

Tatmadaw [army camps] in Kaw Lu Der village tract are based in Thee Mu Hta, T'Khaw Hta, Saw Hta, Kaw Way Kyoh, Ler Klay Kyoh, and Saw Hpa Hta areas.

There are many other Tatmadaw [army camps] based in the area between Kaw Tay Mu Der village tract and Lu Der area.

The Tatmadaw Infantry Battalion [IB]<sup>3</sup> #92 base is in Thee Meh Hta, Saw Hta, and T'Khaw Hta areas, the Light Infantry Battalion [LIB]<sup>4</sup> #75 base is in Kaw Way Kyoh, Ler Klay Kyoh, and Saw Hpo Hta areas, the LIB #590 base is in Kyu Lu, Beh Hpa Tee Lu, and Maw Hpu, and the LIB #351 base is in Kaw Thway Kyoh, Hpla Hkoh, and Ku Kwa Hkoh areas.

The IB #72 base is in Hpwa Gaw, Paw Khay Hkoh, and Der Kyu areas, the LIB #440 base is in Hpa Gaw Lo, Ler Mu Plaw, and Saw Mu Plaw areas, the LIB #432 base is in Hkay Pu, T'May Hta, and Khaw Daw Hkoh areas, the IB #30 base is in Maw Law and Lo Kaw Kyoh areas, and the LIB #436 base is in K'Ser T'Kwee area.



These photos were taken on May 14<sup>th</sup> 2017 in the area between Pla Hkoh and Saw Mu Plaw village tracts, Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District. These photos show Pla Hkoh hill, villagers' houses, farms, and the army camp location of Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion [LIB] #351. The Tatmadaw army camp is based in the area where there are no trees on the hill, a 30-minute distance by foot from the villagers' houses and farms. [Photos: KHRG]

### **Tatmadaw activities**

On March 26<sup>th</sup> 2017 at 3 PM, Tatmadaw soldiers based in Ku Hkoh area set [bushes, vegetation and dry leaves] on fire to clear the area around a vehicle road. The fire reached seven hill farms adjacent to this area. [The fire had a damaging impact because] some of the hill farms were

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<sup>3</sup> An Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) 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.

<sup>4</sup> A Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) usually comprises of 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are undermanned, with less than 200 soldiers. 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.

new. [This denotes a phase in hill farming] where the land has not yet been cleared for cultivation. Clearing vegetation traditionally happens in two phases: cutting down, and then burning trees and vegetation in a controlled fashion.] Local community members were unable to plant rice paddy on these hill farms this year [because the Tatmadaw interrupted the traditional cycle of agriculture by prematurely burning the hill farms].

The fire reached the hill farms at 6 PM on March 26<sup>th</sup> 2017, and burned until 10 AM on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2017, but the fire had not [been fully] extinguished by then. Those hill farms are in P'Leh Wah Hkee, Htee Mwee Pwa and Hpeh Daw Kla areas. The owners of the hill farms are five Ku Day villagers in Pla Hkoh village tract and two other villagers from Yeh Mu Plaw village tract.

In addition to this incident, all of the Tatmadaw Battalions based in Lu Thaw Township strengthened their army camps and sent for more rations. This has caused concerned in the local community. Villagers are worried that the Tatmadaw may attack [civilians]. They reported that they do not trust the National Ceasefire Agreement [NCA]<sup>5</sup>.



<sup>5</sup> On October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups and on-going conflicts in ethnic regions, a [Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement \(NCA\)](#) was signed between the Burma/Myanmar government and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited to the negotiation table, including the KNU, see “[Myanmar signs ceasefire with eight armed groups](#),” Reuters, October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015. The signing of the NCA followed the January 12<sup>th</sup> 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Karen civilians and the KNU have more recently expressed their concerns about the lack of progress in moving from a ceasefire towards genuine political dialogue.



These photos were taken on March 28<sup>th</sup> 2017 in Pla Hkoh and Yeh Mu Plaw village tracts. The photos show several hill farms that were burned on March 26<sup>th</sup> 2017 by Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #351, based in Kuh Hkoh, Pla Hkoh village tract and Infantry Battalion (IB) #72, based in Pwa Gaw, Yeh Mu Plaw village tracts. These hill farms were owned by villagers who live in Pla Hkoh and Yeh Mu Plaw village tracts.

The first and second photos show the hill farms that were so damaged by the fire that villagers were unable to cultivate them. This damage was so extensive because the Tatmadaw interrupted the traditional cycle of forestry management by prematurely burning the hill farms.

The third and fourth photos show the hill farms that villagers were able to cultivate despite the fire. However, it was hard for the villagers to plant new paddy seeds because of the difficulty of clearing tree branches and small logs that were not fully burnt. [Photos: KHRG]

## Internal Displacement

Most internally displaced people [IDPs] have returned to their plain and hill farms to start cultivating them, even though Tatmadaw army camps are situated nearby. The community is relying on some Karen National Liberation Army [KNLA] soldiers and village 'home guards'<sup>6</sup> for their security. The local community has recruited more 'home guards' to be able to work more effectively.

Violent conflict in 1975, 1985 and 1987 has resulted in the displacement of civilians to other villages and village tracts. Because of internal displacement, local community members have faced serious food shortages annually. This is because the rice paddy fields that they are now cultivating cannot produce enough rice because of the poor quality of the soil. The internally displaced population still does not have access to their land [of origin]. Because they cannot access their farms, they are facing severe livelihood challenges in IDP sites.

Some internally displaced people have temporarily returned to their villages to resume farming their land. There are still many desolate farms [from the time that their owners became displaced] in Saw Mu Plaw, Ler Mu Plaw, Hkay Pu, and Kaw Lu Der village tracts.

On May 15<sup>th</sup> 2017, 615 IDPs gathered together by the nearby Tatmadaw vehicle road to protest for their rights. The IDPs came from three village tracts in Lu Thaw Township: Saw Mu Plaw, Ler Mu Plaw and Yeh Mu Plaw village tracts. The protest took place in Thee Nga Plaw, a 25-minute walk away from the [Tatmadaw] IB #72 army camp in Keh Deh Kyoh.

Thee Nga Plaw is a place from where the Tatmadaw could see the IDPs gather to protest from their army camp. In Pla Hkok village tract, a sign was erected stating that *"IDPs held a protest urging the Tatmadaw to withdraw their army camps from their original working areas and villages."*

Protestors held up four slogans advocating for their rights:

- 1) *We do not want to be forcibly ruled by other ethnic [groups]*
- 2) *Tatmadaw camps based in our area have to withdraw in 2017*
- 3) *We want to work freely and peacefully for our livelihoods*
- 4) *We want to be ruled by our own ethnic leaders*

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<sup>6</sup> 'Home guard' or *gher der* groups have been organised locally in parts of northern Karen State to address Tatmadaw operations targeting civilians and the resulting acute food insecurity. Villagers interviewed by KHRG have reported that *gher der* were established with the objective of providing security for communities of civilians in hiding, particularly when those communities engage in food production or procurement activities, and when other modes of protection are unavailable. For more on the *gher der* see: ["Self-protection under strain: Targeting of civilians and local responses in northern Karen State,"](#) KHRG, August 2010.

Villagers from numerous villages in the area came together to protest. They called for the Tatmadaw to withdraw from their army camps so that the local community could return to their villages and resume cultivating their lands.



These photos were taken on May 15<sup>th</sup> 2017, in Pla Hkoh village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District. They show IDPs in Lu Thaw Township holding a protest to urge the Tatmadaw to withdraw their army camps in order to enable IDPs to return to their original villages and work on their plain and hill farms safely and securely.

The photos above show IDPs holding a short worship service before the protest. The photos below show the protest signs written in S'Gaw Karen language: “Villagers in Pla Hkoh village tract are holding a protest to urge the Tatmadaw to withdraw from our original villages and working areas.” In total, 615 IDPs participated in this protest. [Photos: KHRG]

## Health

Civilians [in Lu Thaw Township] faced common illnesses such as diarrhoea, stomach-aches, cough, malaria, and joint pain. There are clinics in some areas [of Lu Thaw Township], but they are not always accessible due to the distance. These clinics do not always have adequate medicine. Some villagers know how to use herbal medicine [traditional medicine using plants from the forest] so they share their skills with their neighbours [in order to cure their illnesses].

## Education

There are three types of school [in Lu Thaw Township]: [self-organised] civilian schools, religious schools and Karen National Union [KNU] schools supported by Karen Education Department. Teachers from all of the three types of schools do not receive adequate salaries.

Each teacher received only 7,000 baht (US \$ 214)<sup>7</sup> per year, so they could not secure enough food for their families.

### Landmines

Armed groups have recently planted landmines in Lu Thaw Township.<sup>8</sup> The local community believes that the landmines were planted for security purposes, because of the inefficiency of village 'home guards' and a lack of trust towards the Tatmadaw. Villagers believe that if it were not for those reasons, there would be no landmines [in Lu Thaw Township].

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

- "Hpapun Interview: Naw H---, December 2017", (June 2018)
- "Hpapun Incident Report: Tatmadaw road construction results in the indiscriminate firing of mortars and displacement"
- "Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township and Dwe Lo Township, September 2017 and February 2018", (June 2018)
- "Hpapun Situation Update: Lu Thaw Township, February to March 2018", (May 2018)
- "Attacks on villagers, ongoing fighting and displacement in Hpapun and Toungoo districts from January to April 2018", (May 2018)

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<sup>7</sup> All conversion estimates for Thai bhat in this report are based on the official market rate of June 18, 2018 of THB 32.66 to US \$1.

<sup>8</sup> Myanmar is one of the few countries not party to the [Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production, and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction](#), also known as the Mine Ban Treaty. Although the laying of landmines was prohibited in the [2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement](#), Myanmar is one of the last remaining countries where landmines are still actively used. KHRG has found that the Tatmadaw, KNLA, DKBA (Benevolent, Buddhist, and splinter) and BGF have all planted landmines in Karen State. In '[Uncertain Ground: Landmines in eastern Burma](#)' KHRG, 2012, KHRG illustrates how civilians view landmines either as a source of protection or as a threat depending on the location of the landmines and which actors planted them. However, according to the [International Campaign to Ban Landmines \(ICBL\)](#), landmines may remain active for over fifty years and pose a threat to anyone in proximity to them. KHRG continues to receive reports on landmines that have not been cleared, the laying of new landmines, and an increased risk of mortality from contaminated civilian areas. KHRG strongly recommends in its report, '[Foundation of Fear: 25 years of Villagers' Voices from Southeast Myanmar](#),' KHRG, 2017, that the Myanmar Government, Tatmadaw, BGF, and ethnic armed groups (EAGs) agree to and enforce a comprehensive ban on the use of landmines and ensure that the existence of landmines are marked and made known to villagers.