



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Concerns over a dam construction project, lands allocated as reserved forest and extortion from Myanmar government staff in Ler Doh Soe, K'Ser Doh, Ler Muh Lah townships and the Lay Nya Bu Pyay special area, August to October 2018

This Situation Update describes events that took place in Ler Doh Soe, K'Ser Doh, and Ler Muh Lah townships, as well as in the Lay Nya Bu Pyay special area, Mergui-Tavoy District between August and October 2018. Villagers from K'Ser Doh Township expressed concerns over a dam construction project in their area, and the allocation of lands as reserved forests threatens the livelihoods of several villages in Ler Muh Lah Township. Still in Ler Muh Lah Township, the presence of armed Tatmadaw¹ soldiers caused concerns among local villagers, and governmental staff extorted money from civilians in exchange of household registration documents. The local population in these four areas also experiences challenges in accessing quality education and healthcare.²

Concerns over a dam construction project in K'Ser Doh Township

In Paw Taw village, Paw Kloh area, K'Ser Doh Township, Myanmar government officials and some specialists came and carried out preparatory assessments to build a hydroelectric dam on the Paw Kloh River, along which many villages are located. Although this happened several years ago, it still causes concerns among local villagers, as they oppose the construction of another dam in their area. Indeed, there is already a hydroelectric dam next to Paw Taw Lay village, but it only provides electricity to two villages: Paw Taw Lay and Hkay Tah. Two sites are being examined for the construction of a dam in the Paw Kloh area: one in Paw Taw village and one in K'Htaw Nee village. Villagers from Paw Taw are worried that the construction of another dam will damage their plantation lands, and especially their betel nut plantations. KHRG could not find out which company was responsible for implementing this project, and no meetings were held to inform the villagers about its potential impacts and seek their consent.

¹ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

² The present document is based on information received in November 5th 2018. 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.

Allocation of lands as reserved forest resulting in livelihood difficulties in Ler Muh Lah Township

In 2018, the local population found out that that the Myanmar government had allocated lands as reserved forest in P'Law area. Two villages, Tha May Plaw (over 20 households) and H--- , are inside that reserved forest, so the local villagers are now theoretically forbidden to work on their lands. They also fear that they might be evicted from their homes. Therefore, they asked the KNU authorities of Mergui-Tavoy District for help. They received no response, which caused additional concerns among them.

In 2015, the local population of K'Pyaw village, Ler Muh Lah Township found out that the Myanmar government had also allocated lands as reserved forest in their area. This caused difficulties for and concerns among the local villagers who have cattle, because their communal and grazing lands are now located inside the reserved forest [and therefore cannot be used for animal husbandry purposes anymore]. If the Myanmar authorities see animals inside the reserved forest, they will shoot them. A villager from H--- said: *"We do not have a place to feed our animals. Raising domestic animals is one way of earning for our livelihood. In the past, when there was no reserved forest, raising animals helped us a lot and we could send our children to school. But forming a reserved forest like this made it challenging for us to raise our animals."*

Tatmadaw activities raising concerns among civilians in Ler Muh Lah Township

Twelve fully equipped Tatmadaw soldiers from Infantry Battalion #103 led by Commander Soe Thu Aung stayed at the H--- village secretary's house in P'Law area, Ler Muh Lah Township for fifteen days from October 15th 2018 onwards. This caused security concerns among civilians. Tatmadaw soldiers also patrolled around the village at night, and prevented the villagers from using torch lights after dark. The village secretary said: *"I am scared too. I do not know why they came to live here"*. A village head also confirmed that this situation caused fear and insecurity among the villagers.

Extortion from Myanmar government staff in Ler Muh Lah Township

Staff from the Myanmar Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population office in P'Law Town, Ler Muh Lah Township came to U--- village to issue household registration documents to the local population. U--- villagers reported that the public servants asked 3,000 kyats (USD 1.98 as of 14/08/2019) from each household, even though this document should be issued at no cost. The villagers gave them the money but some took their photos as evidence. The public servants then got angry. They stopped issuing household documents and accepting money. Before they went back to P'Law Town, they told the villagers: *"Report this case if you dare."* The local people do not remember the exact date of the incident, but it took place during the period covered by this situation update.

Healthcare and education

Most villages in these four areas do not have a clinic in their vicinity. When people are sick, they have to go to hospitals that are located very far from their villages. This can be challenging because of poor road infrastructure. In some areas where there is a clinic, there is not enough medicine for the sick, or the medicine available has expired. Such problems were reported in Zar Di Win village, P'Law area, Ler Muh Lah Township. In addition, healthcare services are not free as villagers have to pay for the medicine they buy. As a result, some of them cannot afford to access treatment. Some clinics do not even have enough nurses. On some occasions, sick villagers did not see any nurse at the clinic. Local people need clinics in their area to get easier access to healthcare, and some asked both the Karen National Union and the Myanmar government to provide more support to the healthcare sector.

In terms of education, most of the schools in these four areas are run by the Myanmar government. In Kler Pu village, K'Mo Thway area, Ler Doh Soe Township, the parents of the schoolchildren face challenges because they have to pay for teachers to come and teach in their villages, as the teachers' salaries are decreasing. They also have to pay for textbooks and notebooks because they do not get them for free anymore. This makes it difficult for the parents to send their children to school since they also face livelihood difficulties. Another problem is that Karen teachers in Myanmar government schools are not allowed to teach Karen language during school hours – only before or after. Sometimes, some government teachers are not entirely focused on their job, and some even use phones during class hours. This undermines the quality of the education received by the students. Therefore, villagers from Ler Doh Soe Township reported to KHRG that they want better teaching methods and also the inclusion of Karen language classes in the school curriculum.

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

- ["Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Extortion and Land Confiscations in Tanintharyi Township, November 2017 to January 2018"](#), (December 2018)
- ["Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Tanintharyi Township, November 2017 to March 2018"](#), (September 2018)
- ["Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: K'Ser Doh Township, June to September 2017"](#), (December 2017)

About KHRG

Founded in 1992, the Karen Human Rights Group is an independent local organisation committed to improving the human rights situation in Southeast Myanmar. 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.khrg.org.