



Situation Update

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Mergui-Tavoy District Situation Update: Access to civil documents, COVID-19, education and the 2020 general election, August to October 2020

This Situation Update describes events that occurred in K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District from August to October 2020, including problems in access to civil documents, activities surrounding the 2020 general election, as well as an update on the COVID-19¹ situation. With COVID-19 spreading to Mergui-Tavoy District, increased restrictions have added to the livelihood challenges of local villagers. School closures are impacting families and raising concerns about delinquency and drug use among children, as well as online dating and underage online "marriages".²

Introduction

This situation update describes the situation of rural communities in Mergui-Tavoy District from August to October 2020. The main topics included in this situation update are: access to civil documents, political campaigning for the 2020 general election, COVID-19 restrictions and their impact on livelihood and education, including the impact of school closures.

Civil documents

In Mergui-Tavoy District, some civilians have had to pay to become a citizen [to get their civil documents] whereas some people are not able to get citizenship at all [are not able to get civil documents]. This happened in Paw Hkloh area, K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. In order to become a citizen [get their national ID card], local people in this area had to first obtain their household [registration] documents which cost them 50,000 kyats [USD 35.58].³ All the local people from several villages in Paw Hkloh area who did not have a household registration had to apply for it and pay the fee. [Whereas these documents are normally issued free of charge, the requirement of a payment prevented some villagers from obtaining them.]

¹ Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). It was first identified in December 2019 in China, and has resulted in an on-going pandemic. For more information, see WHO, "[Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#)".

² The present document is based on information received in October 2020. 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.

³ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the February 23th 2020 official market rate.

COVID-19 situation and local people's experience

In August 2020, the second wave of COVID-19 started, making gatherings and movement more difficult. During the first wave of COVID-19, there were no reported cases of the virus in Mergui-Tavoy District, so there were not many problems [restrictions]. The only restriction was on holding public gatherings beyond 30 people and worshipping together. However, in this second wave of COVID-19, people in rural areas have become infected. Local people are now facing restrictions on their movement. In October, positive cases of COVID-19 were reported in every township in Mergui-Tavoy District except Tanintharyi Township.

The Myanmar government provided [financial] support to the poor, [including those] who rely on casual day labour. Some villages did not receive any support. Because of the poor monitoring and assessment of [the situation] by the village tract administrator, Wa Hkaw Doh village, Kleh Mu Htee area, K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District never received aid from the government. Wa Hkaw Doh villagers know that the Myanmar government provided aid [to other communities] four times already.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, the increasing price of food has been a challenge [presented problems for villagers]. In the past, one sack of rice cost 22,000 kyats [USD 15.66] but since the outbreak, the price has gone up, ranging from 25,000 to 30,000 kyats [USD 17.79 to 21.35] per sack. At the same time, the price of crops produced by local farmers has decreased and much of their crops did not even get sold. As a result, local people are facing challenges in providing food for their families and managing other expenses.

Education situation

Due to COVID-19, [many schools have closed and] children are complaining about not having classes: *"We are so bored and we are getting older with no worth [not able to improve our skills and knowledge through education]. We cannot study and our time is wasted [with nothing to do]."* Some local villagers have added that *"when they [children/adolescents] are not able to learn, we have seen that they follow their own desires and start chewing betel nut, smoking, drinking beer, and some even use drugs."* In addition, some local parents recounted: *"Since there is no school, teenagers have started using phones and date each other through Facebook. Some even got married [un-officially]."* *"We do not know how to deal with this anymore. It becomes difficult and challenging for parents when underage children are married [or at least claim to be married]."* Parents also feel depressed about this.

2020 general election update

The increase in the number of political parties in the 2020 election led to confusion for civilians. Many have remarked: *"We do not know who to vote for anymore because there are a lot of parties."* In addition, Karen people are saying that every party has Karen candidates who do campaigning and who say that they will be working for Karen people. *"We do not know which party to vote for so this leaves us confused."* A villager in Noh Hpa Doh, Kleh Muh Htee area, K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District said: *"It would be great if all Karen people are in the same party. Now that the Karen party [Karen National Democratic Party] was formed, Karen people are also joining other parties as candidates, so I see that the votes of Karen civilians will go to several parties, which will prevent the Karen party from winning anymore [in the future]."*

Due to COVID-19, the Ministry of Health and Sports declared a ban on public gatherings [which was not adhered to by the campaigning political parties]. In local communities, villagers remarked: *"We cannot worship together or gather in groups. But we see that [political] parties are campaigning in groups and village leaders are calling almost every villager to come and listen to the campaign speech."* Villagers see that the activities of the government are not aligned with the policy of the Ministry of Health and Sports. Local people are saying: *"We do not*

understand the situation anymore. The disease [COVID-19] is not decreasing but actually increasing throughout the country. [...] We did not want to go when the parties came to do campaigning but we were afraid that people would see us as careless [irresponsible], so we had to go. We worry about getting the disease [COVID-19] as well because the party representatives are not people in our community.”

Conclusion

Since COVID-19 infections have been increasing in local areas, information was received through phone communication only. We [field researchers] cannot meet local people in person. This situation update was prepared during the second wave of the COVID-19 outbreak.

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

- [“Mergui-Tavoy District Interview: Logging activities by the Myanmar Logging Company threaten local livelihoods, summer of 2019”](#), July 2020.
- [“Mergui-Tavoy District Interviews: Tatmadaw soldiers prevented Karen villagers from displaying their ethnic flag in front of their local school in Ta Naw Th’Ree Township, January 2020”](#), June 2020.
- [“Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Concerns over a dam construction project, lands allocated as reserved forest and extortion from 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”](#), October 2019.

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.

Mergui-Tavoy (Tanintharyi) District

