



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Situation Update

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Mergui-Tavoy District Situation Update: COVID-19, access to civil documents and livelihood difficulties, August and September 2020

This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Lenya Bokpyin Special Area [Township], Mergui-Tavoy District in August and September 2020. In Chaung Mon and Kaw Baw areas, local villagers were barred from operating COVID-19¹ screening checkpoints by the Myanmar government; and local communities did not receive enough support to cope with the consequences of the pandemic. Ethnic villagers from several localities also experienced challenges in getting their ID cards because they were either discriminated against by Myanmar government staff or unable to obtain the necessary supporting document. Floods and the destruction of farmland by wildlife also resulted in difficulties for local communities.²

COVID-19

The Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW)³ provided some materials for two COVID-19 screening checkpoints in Lenya Bokpyin Special Area. Those COVID-19 screening checkpoints are in A--- village, Kaw Baw area (village tract) and B--- village, Chaung Mon area [village tract]. Those screening checkpoints were established twice: the first time during the first wave of infections [second quarter of 2020] and the second time during the second wave [from mid-August 2020 onwards]. Even though the local population built those two screening checkpoints, they could not do anything [the Myanmar government did not give them permission to run these checkpoints]. [In the absence of functioning screening checkpoints,] local villagers now worry that outsiders might travel to the area [and spread the virus].

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 February 2020. It was provided by a community member in Mutraw 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 The Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) is the health department of the Karen National Union. It was established in 1956 to address the lack of public healthcare resources in rural Southeast Myanmar. It currently operates a network of community-based clinics in the region, but its capabilities remain limited due to funding constraints.

On September 6th 2020 local leaders and villagers held a meeting in B--- village to talk about setting up a screening checkpoint. I [KHRG researcher] attended the meeting myself. Although the screening checkpoint was eventually set up, the Myanmar government did not give us [local villagers, local village leaders and local KDHW representatives] permission to do any activities at the checkpoint. In addition, local villagers did not receive any prevention material or support such as money, food, masks or hand sanitizer; and they were not allowed to go to the screening checkpoint either. The Myanmar government village administrator did not do anything for the villagers, and he did not provide any help regarding COVID-19 prevention.

U⁴ Ngway Soe is the [Myanmar government] A--- village administrator. He is a 34-year-old man. He did not take any responsibility or help the KNU when it comes to the screening checkpoints, but he distributed the support provided by the Myanmar government to the local villagers. Some villagers got 20,000 kyats [USD 14.19]⁵ from the Myanmar government. However; most of the villagers had to give him 5,000 kyats [USD 3.55] back to cover the transportation fees. Only 30 households that really needed help got some COVID-19 financial support from the Myanmar government.



These photos were taken on 7th November 2020 in the S'Tain area, Lenya Bokpyin Special Area, Mergui-Tavoy District. They show the COVID-19 screening checkpoint built by the local villagers with support from the KDHW. [Photos: KHRG]

Access to civil documentation

In September 2020, local villagers from C--- village and D--- village, Nan Ka Plaung village tract, Lenya Bokpyin Special Area [Township] went to E--- village to process their ID cards. They had to sleep there for three to four days but they were not able to get their ID cards. The Myanmar government staff in Pyi Gyi Ma Naing Township said they would not issue ID cards to these villagers because they are not from Pyi Gyi Ma Naing area. They [Myanmar government staff] added that villagers from Htee Hkee area, Lenya Bokpyin Special Area [Township] were rebels, and that they regard this area as a black area [because the Karen National Liberation Army⁶ is operating there].

⁴ U is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

⁵ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the February 24th 2021 official market rate.

⁶ The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

Local villagers from C--- and D--- villages are still in the process of trying to obtain ID cards. One villager from D--- village said: *“I have lived here for over ten years and I have five children already, but they could not issue ID cards for us yet. I did not get birth certificates for my children either.”* Most of the local villagers do not have household registration documents, so they cannot process their ID cards. They do not get birth certificates for their children either. Only a very few households [one or two] have been able to get birth certificates for their children. Birth certificates are usually provided to pregnant women who get their vaccines regularly. Women from these [remote] areas cannot go [to the nearest healthcare facilities] and get vaccines when they are pregnant [as the journey can take up to one day]. Because of the distance, there is no one to notify them about the right time to and get these vaccines either.

The Myanmar government staff asked the local villagers originally from other areas but living in C--- and D--- villages to bring recommendation letters [issued by the authorities of their village of origin] with them to be able to process their ID cards. However, the same local villager told KHRG: *“My village of origin is very far from here so I cannot go back just to get a recommendation letter.”* Local children cannot attend Myanmar government high schools because they do not have ID cards and household registration documents. They can only attend KECD schools. The parents worry for their children’s future as they cannot go to high school to continue with their education.

Karen people from H--- village, Kaw Baw village tract can get ID cards easily from the Township [authorities] but they have to pay for it. They have to pay 10,000 kyats [USD 7.10] per person for their ID cards. Although the responsible leaders [Myanmar government township authorities] who issue ID cards said they would be issued for free, the villagers have to pay for them anyway. Some villagers cannot afford this expense [and had to borrow money to be able to afford their ID card]. I [KHRG researcher] could not interview villagers regarding this problem because they are afraid to share this information. I could not take photos either. However, I have been to H--- village myself and I have met with these villagers.

Villages such as D---, F---, G--- and C--- are facing the same issues. The villagers from those areas used to flee from the fighting quite often before the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)⁷ was signed. [Although the security situation has improved], they have to stay on alert and still be careful. Whenever the local villagers hear about any conflicts, they are ready to pack and flee. A local villager interviewed by KHRG said: *“We are just ‘runners’. We had to flee whenever the fighting happened in the past, and even now we have to be careful all the time. We are not in peace yet; we still cannot sleep and live peacefully like people from other areas.”*

Paddy fields destroyed by elephants

In August and September 2020, wild elephants destroyed many hill paddy farms belonging to local villagers from 15 villages in Chaung Mon and S'Tain areas, Lenya Bokpyin Special Area

⁷ On October 15th 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups, 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 Karen National Union. It was followed by the adoption of a Code of Conduct by the signatories in November 2015. In February 2018, two additional ethnic armed groups signed the NCA under pressure from the Burma/Myanmar government.

[Township]. The villagers affected could not prevent their paddies from being destroyed, nor harvest enough rice due to the extent of the damage. They did not get any help from the local leaders. These villagers are now facing livelihood problems, so they need immediate support.

Floods

On September 19th and 20th 2020, many villages in Taung Ngae, Chaung Mon and S'Tain areas and in some other plains areas close to the river were hit by floods. The villagers had to move to other places such as highlands or mountain areas. They did not receive any kind of support so they had to arrange everything by themselves. In my [KHRG researcher] perspective, the village heads and the local leaders have many shortcomings because they do not provide any kind of help to the villagers. Almost 300 households were affected by the floods. I witnessed it myself in some areas. Floods happen every year during the rainy season. Therefore, local villagers have to leave their village every rainy season and come back to their area during the summer.



These photos were taken on 30th October 2020 in Chaung Mon and S'Tain villages. They show the impact of the floods on the local areas. Many of the Karen villages affected did not receive any support. [Photos: KHRG]

Perspective of the researcher

There are many problems in Lenya Bokpyin Special Area. The Myanmar government does not give permission to set up COVID-19 screening checkpoints. Karen people are at risk of ethnic discrimination. Karen people get much less support and the administrators from the Myanmar government do not prioritise and respect Karen communities. I experienced it as well.

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.khrq.org.

Mergui-Tavoy (Tanintharyi) District

