



## Situation Update

December 13<sup>th</sup> 2021 / KHRG # 21-141-S1

## **Mu Traw District Situation Update: Airstrikes, fighting, indiscriminate shelling and landmine contamination resulted in the displacement of villagers, one injury and one death in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District, March to May 2021**

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*This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw (Hpapun) District during the period between March and May 2021, and includes information about State Administration Council (SAC) military airstrikes, fighting between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and SAC forces, indiscriminate shelling, and landmine contamination. Villagers were displaced by airstrikes and ongoing fighting between the KNLA and the SAC military. Indiscriminate firing of mortars also caused villagers to flee into nearby forests, and resulted in the death of one villager and injury to another. New landmines have been planted and because of this, many villagers are afraid to return to work in their fields, and some livestock have been killed by landmine explosions. Villagers have already been displaced in the forest for three months and are now facing movement restrictions and livelihood difficulties.<sup>1</sup>*

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### Introduction

This situation update highlights recent events in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District for the period between March and May 2021. The update includes information on the planting of landmines, State Administration Council (SAC)<sup>2</sup> military airstrikes, the indiscriminate firing of mortars into local villages, as well as fighting between the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>3</sup> and SAC forces<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received in May 2021. It was provided by a community member in Mu Traw 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.

<sup>2</sup> The State Administration Council (SAC) is the executive governing body created in the aftermath of the February 1st 2021 military coup. It was established by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on February 2nd 2021, and is composed of eight military officers and eight civilians. The chairperson serves as the de facto head of government of Myanmar and leads the Military Cabinet of Myanmar, the executive branch of the government. Min Aung Hlaing assumed the role of SAC chairperson following the coup.

<sup>3</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

<sup>4</sup> Tatmadaw is the term most commonly used in referring to Myanmar's armed forces. The term has been used by KHRG throughout its reporting history, and most consistently during periods of civilian government. Since the February 1st 2021 coup and the military's establishment of the State Administration Council (SAC) as the executive governing body of Myanmar, Myanmar's armed forces have also come to be referred to as the SAC military. KHRG uses the term SAC military in specific reference to the Myanmar military since the February 1st 2021 coup. During previous periods of military rule, KHRG also used the names adopted by the military government in referring to the

## Landmines

On March 25<sup>th</sup> 2021, SAC Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)<sup>5</sup> #341 based at Hpapun Town were monitoring their army camp surroundings when one of their soldiers stepped on a landmine planted by the KNLA and died in the landmine explosion. Immediately after the incident, SAC forces fired two M-79 [grenade launcher] rounds along with a constant stream of bullets (firing lasted about an hour) into villagers' farms.

On the night of April 13<sup>th</sup> 2021, SAC LIB #434, based at Hpapun Town, and led by Battalion Commander Myint Zaw Oo, marched to the area surrounding A--- village, Meh Klaw village tract,<sup>6</sup> Dwe Lo Township [and planted landmines along the way]. On the same night they planted the landmines, a pig from A--- village, Meh Klaw village tract, Dwe Lo Township stepped on a landmine [and died].

Again, on April 14<sup>th</sup> 2021, the LIB #434 battalion commander and his soldiers planted landmines in the area surrounding O--- village, Htee Tha Loh and Poh Wa Day areas. These areas are located in Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township.

From March 25<sup>th</sup> 2021 to May 3<sup>rd</sup> 2021, villagers' livestock [pigs and other animals] died in the landmine explosions [cannot specify the exact number]. Villagers were afraid to look for their livestock because of the landmines and because of the indiscriminate shelling taking place near their villages. The KNLA also planted landmines, mostly near SAC military camps, and informed villagers not to go to the areas where they had planted landmines. The KNLA told villagers that they planted the landmines in order to protect themselves and the villagers' livelihoods.

## Fighting between the KNLA and SAC forces and other military activity

Starting from March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, the SAC military increased their activities by sending more soldiers, planting landmines, and firing artillery and light weapons [guns] both day and night. The internet and mobile networks in the area were shut down, denying the villagers living along Hpapun Road their right to information. Moreover, SAC forces conducted security checks along the [Hpapun to K'Ma Moh] road.

Starting from March 25<sup>th</sup> 2021, fighting took place between the KNLA and the SAC military. Shortly afterward, the KNLA started attacking SAC army camps in order to seize them [to preempt further attack in the area by the SAC military]. [The KNLA succeeded in capturing two SAC camps: on March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, Thee Muh Hta army camp (LIB #603) in Bu Tho Township and on April 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, Meh Rah Hta army camp in Bu Tho Township.] SAC troops also withdrew from three different camps in the area: on April 20<sup>th</sup> 2021, Meh Paw Muh Hta army camp, on April 29<sup>th</sup> 2021, Hpah Hka Kyoh army camp and on April 30<sup>th</sup> 2021, Maw Moo Kyoh army camp. The camps were subsequently burned by the KNLA.

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Tatmadaw (i.e. SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) between 1988 to 1997, and SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) from 1998 to 2011), because these were the terms commonly used by villagers in KHRG research areas.

<sup>5</sup> A Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Light 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. LIBs are primarily used for offensive operations, but they are sometimes used for garrison duties.

<sup>6</sup> A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

Fighting continued [regularly] through April 30<sup>th</sup> 2021. During the fighting, SAC forces not only launched mortars into areas near the villages, but many mortar shells also fell directly into local villages. As a result, the villagers were frightened.

### **[SAC military] airstrikes and indiscriminate shelling**

On March 25<sup>th</sup> 2021, SAC forces based at Hpapun Town under Strategic Operation Command (SOC) [unit number unknown] indiscriminately fired both small arms' [guns] bullets and mortars into Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township.

On March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, SAC fighter jets dropped aerial bombs into Day Bu Noh village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township and launched many attacks [engaged in shelling].

On March 28<sup>th</sup> 2021, SAC fighter jets dropped aerial bombs onto the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO)<sup>7</sup> Battalion #1 headquarters located in Thee Kaw Hta Place, Pa Heh village tract, Bu Tho Township.

On April 8<sup>th</sup> 2021, SAC LIB #434 soldiers, led by Battalion Commander Myint Zaw Oo, were guarding road security at N--- village, Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township and indiscriminately fired several rounds of mortars. The mortars fell into H--- village, Meh Klaw village tract, Bu Tho Township. One of the mortars that fell into H--- village remained unexploded. The mortars also fell on the home of Y--- from H--- village. Not only did the SAC military launch mortar shells into H--- village, Border Guard Force (BGF)<sup>8</sup> soldiers also launched mortar rounds into other places such as G--- village, Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract. One villager was injured and another died in the mortar shelling. Both of the victims are from the G--- village, Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract.

On April 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, at 11:50 am, SAC fighter jets dropped five aerial bombs at Toh Nyoh Hta area, Buh Ah Der village tract and Paw Hta area Hkaw Poo village tract.

On April 28<sup>th</sup> 2021, at 10:00 am, SAC fighter jets dropped two aerial bombs on Wa Baw Kyoh Place, [close to O--- village] Hkaw Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township. They also fired at Hkaw Poo village tract with small arms [guns]. On the same day at 11:16 am, they [SAC troops] again dropped two aerial bombs in Dah Hkway (Dagwin) area and also engaged in gunfire at night. At 12:00 pm, they fired three rounds [of mortars] at T'Daw Wah Lay village located near Meh T'Ree Kloh, Lu Pleh Township, Hpa-an District [near the border between Mu Traw and Hpa-an districts] and also fired bullets at the village. At 1:20 pm, they fired two rounds [of mortars] at Koh Law Hta village, Hkaw Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township and again fired bullets. In the meantime, they fired two mortar rounds at Wah Baw Kyoh Place, Hkaw Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township. At 4:00 pm, the SAC military fired about six mortar rounds between Meh T'Ree Kloh and Pa Mah Kloh rivers, along with gunfire in Dah Hkway area.

On April 29<sup>th</sup> 2021, at 11:40 am, the SAC military fired bullets at Pa Mah Kloh [River] in Dah Hkway area. At 01:50 pm, SAC forces fired two rounds of mortars near Meh T'Ree Hta army camp, along with more bullets. The camp is also located in Dah Hkway area. At 11:15 am, the

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<sup>7</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>8</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 Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw.

SAC military fired two rounds of mortars, along with bullets, close to N--- village, Dah Hkway area.

On April 30<sup>th</sup> 2021, at 1:00 am, the SAC military fired three mortars as well as bullets near a KNDO army base at Dah Hkway area. At 2:30 pm, SAC forces fired two rounds of mortars along with bullets at the area around Meh T'Ree Kloh. At 10:35 pm, the SAC military fired mortars and bullets at the hills located in Khaw T'Kyay place [close to K--- village in Hkaw Poo village tract, E--- village in Kyaw Pah village tract, P-- village in Bu Ah Der village tract, and Dah Hkway area], Bu Tho Township.

From March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021 to April 30<sup>th</sup> 2021, villagers in the whole of Bu Tho Township have been living in constant fear of airstrikes by the SAC military. Some villagers fled when they heard the sound of SAC fighter jets. Children, women and older people had to flee to the jungle. It was not comfortable for them sleeping in the jungle. The displaced villagers wondered when the SAC airstrikes would end. One of the villagers living in Bu Tho Township stated: *"If the situation [airstrike, shelling and fighting] continues, we will be afraid to work in our hill fields."* During the period between March 25<sup>th</sup> 2021 and April 30<sup>th</sup> 2021, 5,949 villagers from 36 villages situated in Bu Tho Township were displaced by the airstrikes. They received support two separate times; these supports were organised by Karen Office of Relief and Development (KORD) and the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP). [In May] the firing of mortar rounds and bullets [was] still taking place.

## Conclusion

From March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021 to April 30<sup>th</sup> 2021, villagers took refuge in the forest because of the airstrikes, shelling and gunfire by the SAC military. Since the coup, SAC military activities have increased in the area. Villagers have stated that they will not be able to work in their fields because of the ongoing fighting and indiscriminate firing of mortars and other weapons. As a result, the villagers will struggle to earn their usual livelihood in the year ahead.





The top photos were taken at a field next to A--- village, Hkaw Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District. The photos were taken on April 28<sup>th</sup> 2021. They show where an aerial bomb exploded in a villager's farm on April 27<sup>th</sup> 2021. The two photos at the bottom show A--- and Y---villagers who fled from their village due to the SAC military airstrikes. They were not able to bring anything with them when they fled. [Photos: KHRG]

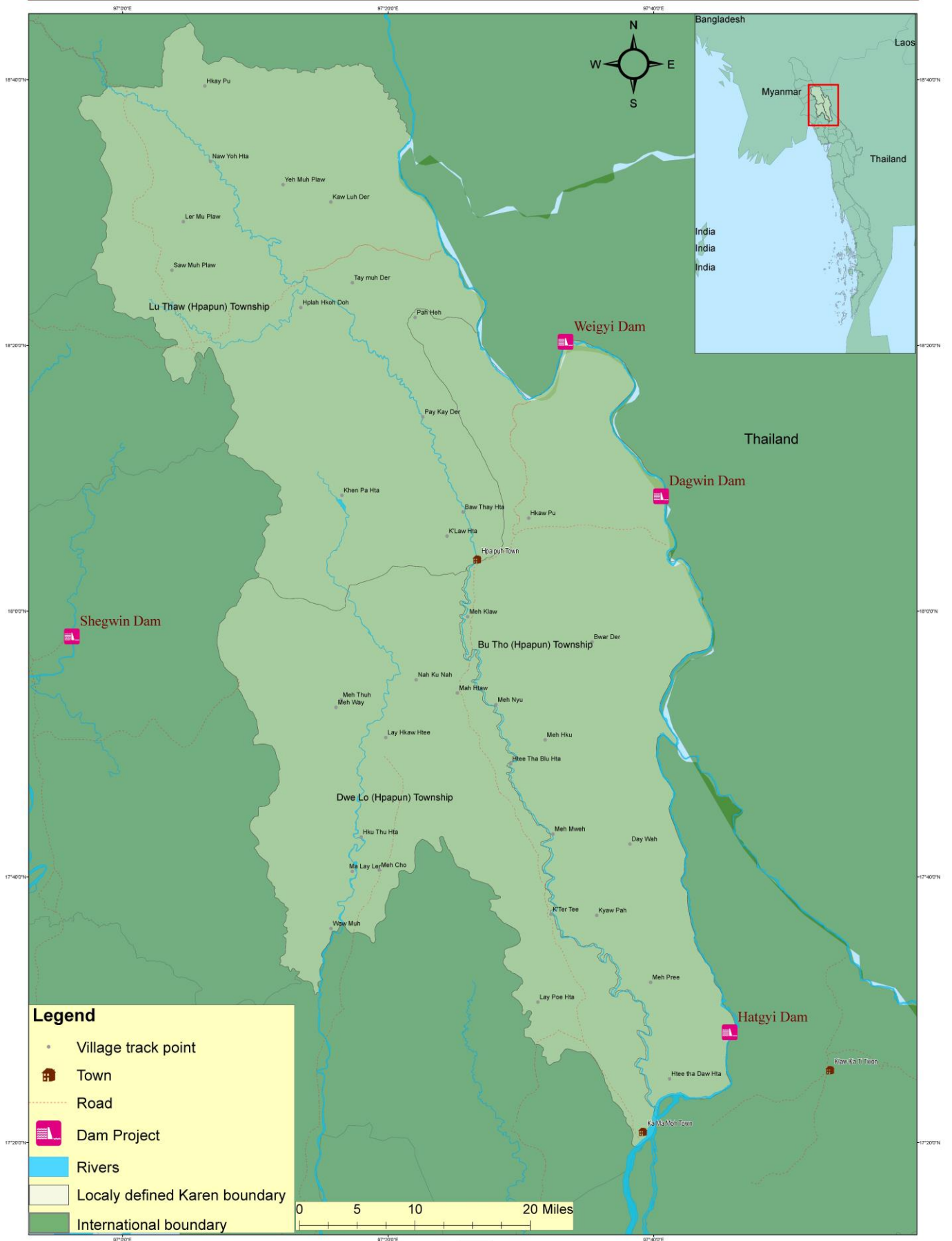
Further background reading on the current situation in Mu Traw District in Southeast Myanmar, including fighting, indiscriminate shelling and landmine contamination can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Mu Traw District Situation Update: Landmine contamination, indiscriminate shelling, arbitrary taxation, movement of troops, and livelihood, education and healthcare situation, May to June 2021”](#), September 2021.
- [“Mu Traw District Incident Report: Two villagers were seriously injured as a result of landmine explosions in Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District, June 2021”](#), July 2021.
- [“Mu Traw District Situation Update: Indiscriminate shelling by the Tatmadaw results in displacement in Lu Thaw Township, December 2020 to February 2021”](#), June 2021.
- [“Mu Traw District Short Update: Skirmishes, indiscriminate shelling by the Tatmadaw and landmine contamination in Dwe Lo and Bu Tho townships, March and April 2021”](#), May 2021.

### 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](http://www.khrq.org).

# Mutraw (Hpapun) District



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