



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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### **Situation Update**

September 23<sup>rd</sup> 2021 / KHRG # 21-203-S1

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## **Mu Traw District Situation Update: Landmine contamination, indiscriminate shelling, arbitrary taxation, movement of troops, and livelihood, education and healthcare situation, May to June 2021**

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*This Situation Update describes events that occurred in Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw (Hpapun) District between May and June 2021. There has been an increase in the movement of State Administration Council (SAC) troops, and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) has engaged in the planting of landmines to prevent SAC soldiers from accessing the area. SAC soldiers have been conducting indiscriminate shelling in the local villages and near villagers' farms and plantations as retaliation against the KNLA. The Border Guard Force (BGF) has set up local checkpoints and engaged in arbitrary taxation along the rivers. Fears of airstrikes, landmines, and the presence of SAC troops have disrupted villagers' ability to work, leading to livelihood difficulties. Education and healthcare have also been impacted. Many villagers prefer to send their children to Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) schools, but the SAC is attempting to gain control over village schools. Healthcare clinics are being displaced by conflict, making it more difficult for villagers to access healthcare.<sup>1</sup>*

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### **Introduction**

This Situation Update covers the period from May 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 to June 30<sup>th</sup> 2021. It describes landmine incidents, the actions and movements of State Administration Council (SAC) troops,<sup>2</sup> indiscriminate shelling around villages and villagers' working areas (farms and plantations), and local villagers' livelihood, education and healthcare situation. It also includes information on the activities of the Karen National Union (KNU),<sup>3</sup> Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)<sup>4</sup> and Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received in June 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 term most commonly used in referring to Myanmar's armed forces is Tatmadaw. 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 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>3</sup> The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main Karen political organisation. It was established in 1947 and has been in conflict with the Burma/Myanmar government since 1949. The KNU wields power across large areas of

## Landmines

There were multiple landmine incidents that occurred from May 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 to June 30<sup>th</sup> 2021 in Bu Tho Township. [Due to travel restrictions related to COVID-19 and ongoing armed conflict in the area, KHRG could not document the exact number.] Most of these incidents involved the KNLA. In some cases, they [the KNLA] planted and then stepped on their own landmines. They had [strategically] planted these landmines in areas that [they know] SAC soldiers access [during their patrols]. SAC soldiers also stepped on some of these landmines. There have been no incidents of the local villagers stepping on or being injured by the landmines [during the reporting period].

## Indiscriminate shelling by SAC troops

From May 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 to June 30<sup>th</sup> 2021, SAC soldiers indiscriminately shelled around the villages, villagers' farms and plantations, using both small and heavy weapons, while they [the SAC] were transporting rations to their army camps in Pa Heh, Hkaw Poo, Bu Ah Der, Meh Klaw village tracts,<sup>6</sup> Bu Tho Township. [In transporting rations, SAC troops trespassed into KNU territory, leading KNLA and KNDO soldiers to fire at them.] Whenever the KNLA or KNDO fired at them, they [SAC soldiers] fired back, into the local villagers' working areas [farms and plantations] or villages as retaliation. The SAC army camps that are based close to the villages and the local villagers' working areas also indiscriminately fired mortars whenever the KNLA and KNDO fired at them.

On June 19<sup>th</sup> 2021, the authorities from KNLA Battalion #102 cleared the landmines [along the road between K'Ma Moh and Hpapun, which is the main road from A--- village to B--- village] to allow local villagers to go to Hpapun Town to buy food and supplies. However, there are still some landmines left beside the road [as well as SAC army camps along the way], so local villagers are afraid to return to their own villages. As such, the KNLA soldiers accompanied them on the way to town when they went to buy food and supplies.

From May 19<sup>th</sup> 2021 to June 30<sup>th</sup> 2021, local villagers reported that the SAC sent more rations and ammunition from the Hpapun Tactical Operations Command (TOC)<sup>7</sup> Base #434 to SAC army camps in Pa Heh, Hkaw Poo, Bu Ah Der, Meh Klaw village tracts, Bu Tho Township. A local villager reported that they [local villagers] are aware that the SAC troops are always preparing themselves for movement.

## KNU, KNLA and KNDO activities

There are many armed actors in this area [in Bu Tho Township], such as the KNLA and the KNDO, as well as the Karen National Police Force (KNPF)<sup>8</sup> and village tract security guards [*gher der*]<sup>9</sup> operating under the KNU. These groups have been planning together [to arrange

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Southeast Myanmar and has been calling for the creation of a democratic federal system since 1976. Although it signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015, relations with the government remain tense.

<sup>4</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

<sup>5</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>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.

<sup>7</sup> Tactical Operations Command; made up of three battalions and a headquarters, usually under a Military Operations Command (MOC) and a Light Infantry Division (LID).

<sup>8</sup> The Karen National Police Force is the law enforcement agency of the Karen National Union. It was established in 1991.

<sup>9</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,

security, food, and medical needs] and collaborating in the battlefield during recent fighting [in some village tracts]. The KNLA and KNDO readied materials, including medicine and food that were needed [by the soldiers themselves and the villagers] for the period from May 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 to June 30<sup>th</sup> 2021. They do what they can for the villagers, and they also provide materials to organisations such as the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) and others that are operating in Bu Tho Township areas. From May 25<sup>th</sup> 2021 to June 15<sup>th</sup> 2021, certain key KNU leaders from Bu Tho Township such as the judges and the secretary from the Department of Transportation, and a KHRG staff member (field researcher), went to the local villages and explained the situation [the recent fighting, displacement, and how to prepare themselves] to local villagers from 11 village tracts [under KNU administration].

### **Arbitrary taxation**

In Bu Tho Township, Meh Pree and Htee Th'Daw Hta village tracts are located far from the [KNU] township office, so the village tracts leaders face pressure [and threats] from the Border Guard Force (BGF)<sup>10</sup> and SAC troops. BGF Battalion #1014, led by Commander Maung Chit, is based in Meh Pree village, Meh Pree village tract, as well as in Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract. On June 9<sup>th</sup> 2021, they [BGF #1014 troops] set up more checkpoints along the Ler K'Baw river bank. There are also three BGF Battalion #1014 checkpoints along the Pweh Loh Kloh river bank. They require the [motor] boats travelling along the river to pay 2,000 kyats [USD 1.09]<sup>11</sup> each [even if they have a travel recommendation letter when they pass the BGF checkpoint]. The boats that do not have recommendation letters are also required to go to Paw Htee Ku village and get these documents [from the BGF army base]. The recommendation letter for a big boat costs 50,000 kyats [USD 27.32] and the letter for a small boat costs 30,000 kyats [USD 16.39].

### **Local villagers and their livelihood situation**

From May 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 to June 30<sup>th</sup> 2021, fighting occurred in multiple areas throughout Bu Tho Township, and the local villagers have lived in fear. They saw [the SAC's] drones flying over the area conducting reconnaissance, and helicopters also flew over many areas [in Bu Tho Township] both day and night. The local villagers who live close to or work near the vehicle road [between Hpapun and K'Ma Maung towns] saw that the Tactical Operations Command (TOC) was sending more troops, rations, and ammunition to their army camps based along the road and to those close to the frontline [close to KNLA army camps], so they are afraid.

On the day of the first airstrike [March 27<sup>th</sup> 2021], the SAC struck Day Bu Noh village, Pay Kay village tract, Lu Thaw Township, Mu Traw District. From this date through June 30<sup>th</sup> 2021, the local villagers have lived in fear and have felt unsafe. They [the SAC] later conducted multiple airstrikes between April 27<sup>th</sup> and May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021: one in Thee Kaw Hta, where a KNDO base is located; one in T'Ree Hkee forest; and one in Toh Nyoh Hta villagers' farms in Bu Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township; one in Paw Hta village; one in Wa Baw Kyo area; one in Meh T'Ree Kloh area; and one in Dah Kway (Dagwin) area, Hkaw Poo village tract, Bu Tho Township. The SAC helicopters conducted reconnaissance throughout the whole area of Bu Tho Township [the exact number of helicopters is unknown]. They [the local villagers] are not happy with the situation.

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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.

<sup>10</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.

<sup>11</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the September 22<sup>nd</sup> 2021 official market rate.

Local villagers' working areas are also close to the SAC army camps so they face difficulties going to their farms and plantation areas and working there. Some local villagers don't dare go to plant in their hill farms, or in their farms close to the SAC army camps and battalion base. The local villagers are afraid of the unexploded ordnances (UXO) that have landed near their farms [afraid they will explode], and fear that there might be landmines and further contamination from exploded landmines in the area. Some are afraid that if they go to work in their farms, the SAC soldiers will arrest them and use them as forced porters. [May, June, July are the months that villagers prepare and plant paddy, so when they cannot work in their fields, they are at greater risk of facing food shortages in the coming year.]

Some conflict-affected areas and areas in the airstrike zone [in Meh Nyoo, Bu Ah Der and Hkaw Poo village tracts, Bu Tho Township] have received support. But there are still some village tracts that haven't received support, such as Meh Klaw, Pa Heh, Meh Hku, Meh Mweh, Day Wah, Kyaw Pa, Meh Pree and Htee Th'Daw Hta. The areas that did receive support received it in the form of money to cover medical costs, rice and other food items, medicine and tarpaulins. The medical costs were covered by arrangement of the Karen Office of Relief and Development (KORD) and the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP). The leaders from the KNU have had to take special efforts to get this support, as it comes from across the border in Thailand. It is difficult for local villagers who live far from the Thai-Myanmar border and away from the Salween River to transport this support back from the border, particularly rice and other food items. Some support from Karen people living abroad was provided to local villagers that are facing greater hardships than others, and to elders who are over 55 years old. However, this foreign support did not cover a large area, providing for only one or two villages.

The local villagers [in Bu Tho Township] are upset because SAC soldiers are attempting to take advantage of the road openings intended to help villagers [access food]. For example, the KNLA noticed that some of the local villagers had run out of food, or had only a small amount of food left, so in June they opened the [Hpapun to K'Ma Maung] road and let the local villagers travel to buy food. The SAC soldiers saw this and took it as an opportunity to send more troops, food [rations] and ammunition [to their frontline army camps] within the district

## **Education**

The schools are open as usual in Bu Tho Township (the schools started opening on June 15<sup>th</sup> 2021); however, villagers have concerns. The local villages that are close to the main road worry that, if fighting occurs, there will be airstrikes and SAC soldiers will conduct indiscriminate shelling in the villages [and target the schools]. The local villagers who used to send their children to government schools do not want to send their children there anymore, and registered their children in the village schools [self-funded schools] instead. Some schools are supported by religious leaders. Some are connected to Myanmar government schools. Since 2019, the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD) has taken a record of all the schools in the local areas, but there are more students now [because parents are not sending their children to government schools]. Most of the village schools in the area only have up to Grade 4, but they had to increase the [number of] grades in 2021 [academic/school year]. They should be recruiting more schoolteachers because there are more grades and more students. The [number of] schools should also be expanded. Therefore, the students' parents are facing difficulties because there are more teachers, and there will be more expenses for the parents [because parents pay for/contribute to salaries for the schoolteachers].

The SAC wants to control the local schools. Meh Pree School, Kyauk Ka Loh School, and La Aw Hkoh School were [mixed schools] connected with the Myanmar government so they [the SAC] would like to take control of those schools now. BGF Battalion #1014 Commander Maung Chit would also like to prevent the village tract leaders [including KNU leaders] from controlling the schools. On June 16<sup>th</sup> 2021, BGF #1014 Battalion Commander Maung Chit contacted the Htee Th'Daw Hta village tract administrator and told him that he needed to find Myanmar government teachers for Kyaw Ka Loh and Meh Pree schools. Soe Myint, the Htee Th'Daw Hta

village tract administrator, asked the advice of the [KNU] township and district officials, who did not give him permission [to accept the BGF battalion leader's order].

### Healthcare

Since the fighting and conflict started [in March 2021], the local villagers have had many healthcare-related problems in Bu Tho Township. The clinics from Bu Tho Township area had to move [relocate] because there are [SAC] drones and helicopters that conduct reconnaissance both day and night. On the night of April 19<sup>th</sup> 2021, the clinic in Kyaw Pah, which is led by the [KDHW] department coordinator Saw C---, had to move to a safer place. The clinic cannot move back to its original location yet, and [the staff] are still living in danger. The other clinics are also preparing to move their materials. [Because of this] it now takes more time for local villagers to go to the clinics when they are sick. There are no doctors, nurses or healthcare workers at Hpapun hospital [a Myanmar government hospital]; there are only the people who go and clean it [the hospital] sometimes. Patients with serious situations have to contact the local monks and religious leaders [when they are going to get treatment in the Myanmar government hospital] or they have to get treatment at the [KNLA] operation command clinic. Common diseases in Bu Tho Township areas are diarrhea, fever, headache, itchy skin, stroke and other minor diseases.

### Conclusion

In this situation update, I [the community member trained by KHRG] would like to compare the situation from last year [2020] and this year [2021] a little bit. In the past, the children would run to see the airplanes whenever they heard them flying. However, now if they hear an airplane, the children cry, and they are afraid. Since the beginning of 2021, local villagers have faced a difficult situation in working for their livelihood. They will have more difficulties in 2022. Local villagers will need more food support. They will need food staples [rice], medicine and education materials. This is what I would like to report in this situation update.

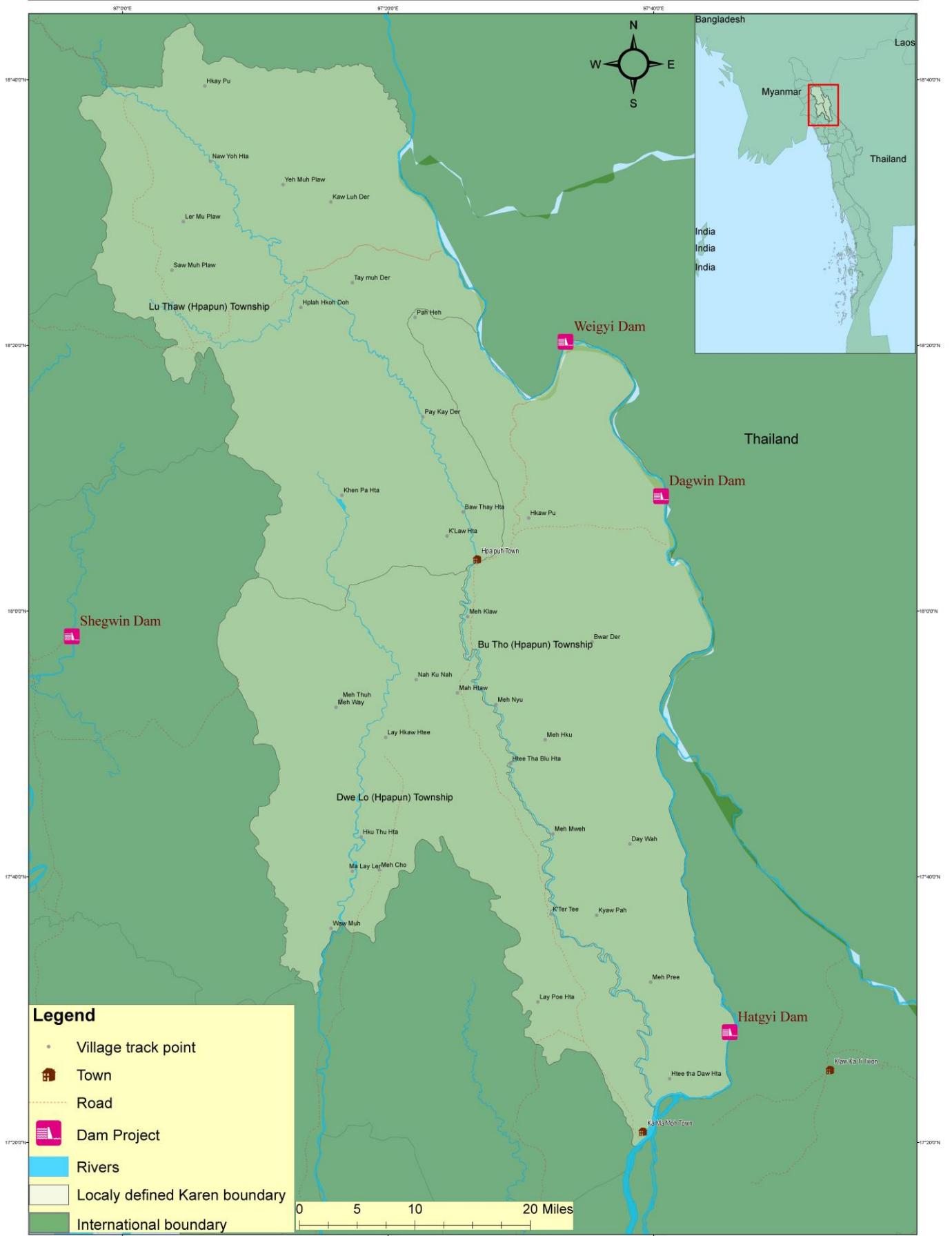
Further background reading on the current situation in Mu Traw District in Southeast Myanmar, including indiscriminate shelling and landmine contamination can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["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



KHRG