



## Short Update

March 19<sup>th</sup>, 2021 / KHRG # 21-57-D2

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## Dooplaya District Short Update: Skirmish between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA in Kaw T'Ree Township, February 2021

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*This Short Update describes events that occurred in Yay Kyaw Gyi village tract,<sup>1</sup> Kaw T'Ree [Kawkareik] Township, Dooplaya District on February 26<sup>th</sup> 2021. On that day, Tatmadaw<sup>2</sup> soldiers entered a Karen National Union (KNU)<sup>3</sup> restricted area, resulting in a skirmish with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).<sup>4</sup> Tatmadaw soldiers eventually stayed in the area until March 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, which raised security concerns among the local population. According to the KNLA, the Tatmadaw tried to enter KNU territory in order to arrest people involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)<sup>5</sup> and anti-coup<sup>6</sup> protests.<sup>7</sup>*

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On February 26<sup>th</sup> 2021, at 11:40 am, fighting between the KNLA Brigade #6, Battalion #18, Company #3 and the Tatmadaw Infantry Battalion (IB)<sup>8</sup> #230 and IB #231, Military Operations

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<sup>1</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>2</sup> Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

<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 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> On February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021, healthcare workers across Myanmar spearheaded a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and initiated labour strikes to protest against the February 2021 military coup. The movement quickly spread to other branches of public service, eventually turning into to a nationwide, large-scale civil disobedience campaign.

<sup>6</sup> On February 1<sup>st</sup> 2021, the Burma Army deposed the democratically elected government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military proclaimed a year-long state of emergency and transferred power to Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar's Armed Forces. Based on unproven fraud allegations, the Tatmadaw invalidated the landslide victory of the NLD in the November 2020 General Election and stated it would hold new elections at the end of the state of emergency. The coup d'état occurred the day before the Parliament of Myanmar was due to swear in the members elected during the 2020 election. Elected President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained, along with ministers, their deputies and members of Parliament.

<sup>7</sup> The present document is based on information received in February 2021. It was provided by a community member in Dooplaya 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>8</sup> An Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most 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, particularly following the signing of the NCA. They are primarily used for garrison duty but are sometimes used in offensive operations.

Command (MOC)<sup>9</sup> #12 broke out in the area between Ywar Thit Kone village and Thar Yar Kone village, Yay Kyaw Gyi village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District [these two villages are located at a 15 to 20-minute motorbike drive from Kawkareik Town]. The two armed groups first fired at each other with small arms. Later on, local villagers heard the sound of artillery [mortars]. The fighting lasted for around 16 minutes.

The skirmish broke out after Tatmadaw soldiers entered a KNU-restricted area<sup>10</sup> without permission from the KNLA. According to the KNLA Brigade #6 operations commander, the Tatmadaw called the KNU township administrator and told him that they would patrol KNU-controlled areas to look for and arrest teachers and doctors [mainly from Kawkareik Town and nearby areas] who joined the CDM and anti-coup protests [some of them sought refuge in KNU-controlled areas to avoid arrest]. The township administrator informed the commander of KNLA Battalion #18 about the Tatmadaw's request. The battalion commander denied them permission and even told the Tatmadaw not to enter the restricted area three or four times before the incident, warning them that fighting would break out if they do. However, the Tatmadaw ignored the warning.

On the day of the incident, a three-truck Tatmadaw convoy entered the restricted area through Ywar Thit Kone Road. According to a local villager, there are usually not many soldiers manning the KNLA checkpoint along this road – only four or five. However, there were around 25 to 30 soldiers [an entire platoon] on that day, as the KNLA had decided to deploy more troops in the area because of the recent anti-coup protests. These KNLA soldiers fired at the truck heading the convoy, prompting the Tatmadaw soldiers to return fire. The two other trucks were not involved in the skirmish.

There were around 30 Tatmadaw soldiers in the trucks. One of the trucks was covered, so eyewitnesses could not see what was inside. However, local villagers said that it was transporting metal barrels. The Tatmadaw soldiers retreated after the skirmish. According to a local villager, three Tatmadaw soldiers died and four of them were injured in the fighting. An ambulance and four Tatmadaw trucks arrived at the incident place later that day. Local villagers were afraid so they stayed in their houses and did not dare to go to the incident place to check on the situation.

Later that day, Tatmadaw soldiers arrived at Ywar Thit Kone and Thar Yar Kone villages and spent the night there without asking permission from anyone. Around 25 soldiers stayed in each village, and some soldiers stayed between the two villages. They stayed near the Asian Highway and stood clear of the restricted area to avoid further skirmishes with the KNLA. It seems that the soldiers still planned to find and arrest the public servants who joined the CDM.

Local villagers were in fear throughout the night because of the presence of Tatmadaw soldiers. Some of them gathered and slept together. Male villagers from both villages went into hiding every night as they were afraid of being arrested and forced to serve as porters. This also happened in other nearby villages. More Tatmadaw soldiers were sent to Kawkareik Town after the incident. On February 27<sup>th</sup> 2021, a Tatmadaw truck brought rations to the soldiers stationed in Ywar Thit Kone and Thar Yar Kone villages. The Tatmadaw soldiers eventually left the area on March 1<sup>st</sup> 2021 [without arresting anyone].

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<sup>9</sup> A Military Operations Command is composed of ten battalions for offensive operations. Most MOCs have three Tactical Operations Commands (TOCs), made up of three battalions each.

<sup>10</sup> As per the 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the KNU and the Burma/Myanmar government, the Tatmadaw are only allowed to operate and travel up to 50 yards [45.72 metres] from either side of roads that connect their army camps through KNLA territory, and only within a 150 yard [137.16 metres] radius around their own army camp.

Further background reading on fighting between armed actors in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Southeast Myanmar Field Report: COVID-19, armed conflict, killings and sexual violence, July to December 2020”](#), February 2021.
- [“Mu Traw Interview: Two villagers were shot by Tatmadaw soldiers in Wa Tho Hkoh village, January 2020”](#), November 2020.
- [“Mu Traw District Situation Update: Anti-Tatmadaw demonstrations and skirmishes between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA, December 2019 to January 2020”](#), September 2020.

### **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).

# Doooplaya (Southeastern Karen State) District



- Legend**
- Village track point
  - 🏠 Town
  - Road
  - 🏗️ Dam Project
  - 🌊 Rivers
  - 🟡 Locally defined Karen boundary
  - 🟢 International boundary

