



Burma/Myanmar Military Aggression Violates the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and Endangers Villagers in Mutraw District, Karen State

Date- 9/3/2018

On Sunday, March 4th, 6 Burma Army battalions comprising over 600 soldiers began invading the peaceful villages of Indigenous Karen people in northern Mutraw (Hpapun) District, Karen State. This area is covered by the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signed by the Karen National Union and the Burma Army. It is also part of the Salween Peace Park, a locally-driven initiative to build peace, protect villagers' lands and forests, and promote Indigenous Karen culture.

The Burma Army soldiers violated the NCA by entering the territory of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) without obtaining prior permission, provoking armed clashes with KNLA soldiers. The invading Burma Army soldiers are currently occupying four locations: Htee Hsee Hta and Way Day Kyoh in Ler Mu Plaw area, and Paw Nah Kyoh and Wah Koh Day near Kay Bu village. Burma Army soldiers in Ler Mu Plaw have dug trenches and are reportedly calling for reinforcements. These are aggressive acts of war and are not a response to any actions of those living in the area.

As of March 8th, the Burma Army's advances have forced over 1,500 villagers to flee from at least 15 villages in Ler Mu Plaw and Kay Bu village tracts. This is the largest forced displacement of civilians in Mutraw since the Karen National Union signed a bilateral ceasefire with the Burma Army in 2012. Villagers now fear that their homes will be ransacked and burned; Burmese soldiers have already shot two of the villagers' buffalo. Displaced villagers are now facing a humanitarian crisis as they are running low on food and medicine.

According to reports, the Burma Army plans to expand its road system from Ler Mu Plaw to Kay Bu. Military roads in this part of Karen State are a source of great fear for local people, who have experienced decades of human rights abuses at the hands of the Burmese military. Roads allow the military to bring heavy weapons into Karen areas, and villagers are often in danger of being shot near these roads despite the ceasefire.

Even though the Burmese military has not withdrawn from the lands of Karen villagers in Mutraw District, local people have begun returning to areas such as Ler Mu Plaw since the ceasefire began. They have begun to rebuild their lives and their communities, culture, and ways of caring for their waters, lands, and forests. Local people are rebuilding their Indigenous customary land governance, and they have established numerous community forests.

The people of Mutraw are now working to establish the Salween Peace Park through bottom-up community consultations. However, rather than respecting this local contribution to the peace process, the Burma Army continues to promote violence and militarization within the boundaries of the Peace Park.

The Burma Army's actions this week undermine trust in the peace process and cause immeasurable hardship for villagers. Villagers have told anyone who will listen that their highest priority is to live peacefully, free from fear. Indeed, the Salween Peace Park initiative is proof that the people of Mutraw truly desire peace and cooperation with whoever is willing to join them in protecting the natural and cultural heritage of their homeland. However, as long as the Burmese military continues to expand and entrench its positions in Karen territory, villagers will experience fear, insecurity, and threats to their lives, livelihoods, and culture. The military's actions also preclude the safe return of Karen IDPs and refugees to their ancestral lands.

The Karen Peace Support Network demands:

1. Immediate withdrawal of Burma Army troops from new offensive positions and return of all troops to established Burma Army bases to de-escalate the situation.
2. An independent investigation by a third party, jointly agreed by both sides, into the actions of the Burma Army and a holding to account of those responsible.
3. An immediate cessation of all provocative actions by the Burma Army which threaten civilians and the peace process.
4. Humanitarian aid for IDPs must go through existing community-based organizations serving the region, rather than through the government or large international organizations based in central Burma.

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