

Press Statement

Karen Villagers Protest Expanding Burma Army Offensives in Mutraw (Hpapun) District

Displaced Karen villagers in the Salween Peace Park hold prayer vigils calling for peace

Monday, March 19, 2018

Ler Mu Plaw village tract, Mutraw (Hpapun) District, Kawthoolei [March 19, 2018]: We, the Indigenous Karen people of Ler Mu Plaw and Kay Bu village tracts, peacefully gathered today to denounce and demand an end to the ongoing Burma Army offensive that forcibly displaced us from our ancestral lands and villages two weeks ago. Around 1,000 of us from 12 villages came to consult together, formulate our collective response to the ongoing emergency, and plan for our communities' security and humanitarian assistance. We also held traditional Karen ceremonies to pray for peace, freedom from fear, and the right to determine our own future.

We, the Indigenous Karen people of Mutraw District, have survived decades of civil war and human rights abuse at the hands of the Burma Army. However, since the 2012 bilateral ceasefire we have taken the lead in efforts to build genuine peace in our homeland. Our communities are actively co-creating the Salween Peace Park, a 5,400-sq. km Indigenous Karen reserve dedicated to peace-building, biodiversity conservation, and cultural preservation. This initiative has grown out of years of effort to rebuild our war-torn ancestral villages, restore customary natural resource governance systems, and establish community forests and wildlife sanctuaries.

Villagers who have fled recent and continuing Burma Army provocations are also among the 15 villages who have organized to protect the Kheshorter Community Forest, 14,600 acres of old-growth forest and endangered species habitat. Kheshorter forest is an ecological and cultural sanctuary for our Indigenous Karen communities.

The Burma Army's actions now threaten to sabotage all this, our grassroots contribution to peace and community-based conservation in Burma/Myanmar.

"The Salween Peace Park brings people and nature together by creating conditions of peace and harmony," explained Saw Nya Ki Htoo, a local Indigenous elder. "On the other hand, the Burma Army's actions cause trouble and scatter our people, preventing us from practicing our spiritual ceremonies, which we can only practice on our own ancestral lands."

More than 1,700 of our villagers, including the elderly, women, and children, have fled during the last two weeks and are now hiding in the forest. In this mountainous region, it is cold at night, and our people are suffering from psychological trauma and various illnesses, exacerbated by shortages of food and medicine. The Burma Army's plan to construct a military road through our land threatens to permanently displace us from our ancestral homes and farms, and will push us into poverty and food insecurity. As Indigenous people, we have a spiritual connection to our ancestral lands, and we have come here today to reaffirm our commitment to protecting that connection and our way of life.

"I have had to flee Burmese soldiers ever since I was a little child," said Naw Pwe, an elderly woman from Ler Mu Plaw. "Now I am old. My whole life, I have faced hardship and suffering. We don't want the Burmese soldiers to come here and build this military road. We just want them to let us live in peace."

In order to save lives, prevent further escalation of armed conflict, and avert the complete breakdown of the peace process in our lands, we, the Indigenous Karen people of Mutraw, hereby affirm our commitment to genuine peace and present our demands as follows:

1. Immediately withdraw all Burma Army troops back to their established bases;
2. Immediately cease all road construction activities between Hto Moh Pleh Meh and Hsa Law Joh military bases;
3. To international humanitarian actors to deliver aid through existing Karen community-based organisations serving the region;
4. To our KNU leaders and the Burma Army to prioritize the withdrawal of the 17 previously-identified Burma Army camps in Mutraw which are close to villagers' lands and are a threat to their lives and livelihoods.
5. To the Burma Army, regional and international governments and organizations to respect and acknowledge our local and Indigenous governance structures for land and natural resource management, education, and health care.

We, the participants in today's ceremony, solemnly placed stones to build a monument commemorating this historic day and our people's sacrifices in the long struggle for lasting peace in our ancestral lands.

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