

The Nightmare Returns

Karen hopes for peace and stability dashed by Burma Army's actions



Photo: Soe Doe (KPSN)



Karen Peace Support Network
April 2018



Burma Army truck on the move in Toungoo District. Photo: KHRG

CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	3
Background: State Violence and Local Resilience in Mutraw.....	4
Mutraw since the 2015 NCA.....	8
Luthaw Karen Communities Rebuild During the Ceasefire Period.....	9
Luthaw 2018 Conflict Update: Roadmap to (Re)militarization.....	10
Impacts on Local Villagers.....	13
• Shooting of Civilians.....	13
• Forced Displacement.....	15
• Food Insecurity.....	15
Long-term Threat to Local Villagers’ Lives, Livelihoods, and IDP/Refugee Return.....	16
Conclusion.....	16
Recommendations	17
Appendices.....	18

Executive Summary

On March 4th, the Burma Army began the largest and most coordinated deployment of troops into Karen State's Mutraw (Hpapun) district since 2008. More than 1,500 Burma Army troops have now crossed into Karen National Union (KNU) controlled areas of Mutraw's Luthaw township, breaching the terms of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and provoking multiple clashes with the Karen National Liberation Army's (KNLA)¹ 5th Brigade. Troops serving under the Burma Army's Southern Command have indiscriminately targeted civilians while more than 2,400 villagers have been forced to flee their land and homes. The majority of those displaced by the Burma Army's current operations had only recently returned to rebuild their villages, farms, and livelihoods following decades of widespread armed conflict.

The KNU and Burma Army are both signatories to the 2015 NCA, which prohibits the expansion of military infrastructure and troop reinforcements in ceasefire areas. However, since March 4, at least eight Burma Army battalions² have entered Luthaw, without prior agreement³ from the KNLA, and begun constructing a military operations road to connect their military bases at Ler Mu Plaw and Kay Pu. If the road is built, Indigenous Karen villagers may be permanently displaced from their homes and ancestral village territories.

The 2012 bilateral ceasefire and 2015 NCA gave people a sense of hope that, perhaps, peace was at hand. The Burma Army's renewed attacks and road construction activities have shattered this hope by once again forcing people from their land and into hiding in the forests. On April 5th, Burma Army troops shot and killed⁴ 42-yr-old Saw O Moo in the Ler Mu Plaw area of northwestern Luthaw. Saw O Moo was a local villager and Indigenous Karen leader. At the time of his death he was travelling home from a community meeting to coordinate humanitarian assistance for villagers displaced by the Burma Army's military operations.

KPSN's findings show that the Burma Army has repeatedly breached the terms of the 2012 and 2015 ceasefire agreements in Mutraw District. The Burma Army is again taking advantage of the ceasefire to accomplish what it was unable to do during earlier periods of widespread armed conflict: expand and upgrade its military infrastructure and capability to seize and control Indigenous Karen people's lands. The Burma Army's actions undermine local people's efforts to build genuine lasting peace, protect their natural and cultural heritage, and facilitate the return of refugees and IDPs to their ancestral lands.

The present report is based on firsthand interviews by KPSN field staff and regular communication with IDPs, villagers, and local community leaders in Mutraw District since the fighting started on March 4th. KPSN members carried out field research including, but not limited to, an intensive field assessment of the IDP situation from March 14th to 17th. This report also draws on more than two decades of documentation and analysis carried out by KPSN member organizations. We hope that this report will assist peace negotiators to resolve the current crisis, prevent the complete breakdown of the fragile peace process, and avert the resumption of widespread armed conflict in Karen State.

¹ The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) is the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU).

² A report from Free Burma Rangers (FBR) names the eight battalions as Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 20, LIB 351, LIB 435, LIB 598, LIB 558, LIB 432, LIB 596, LIB 560. See FBR report, *They Are Running Again, This Time With Babies*, 15 March 2018, accessible at: <http://www.freeburmarangers.org/2018/03/15/running-time-babies-1700-villagers-flee-burma-army-attacks-builds-roads-northern-karen-state/>

³ "Movement of armed troops in the areas controlled by the other is allowed only after obtaining prior agreement." 2015 NCA, Article 8 (b)

⁴ Although at the time this report was published Saw O Moo's body had not been recovered or identified by family or local community members, his death has been presumed following a Statement by the Burma Army Chief Office on April 9th, in addition to a note that the Burma Army left for villagers on April 8th at Day Law Koh stating that they had shot and killed him. Without Saw O Moo's body, his family cannot conduct the traditional grieving and burial ceremonies required by their customs.

Background: State violence and local resilience in Mutraw

Mutraw District has not seen lasting peace for over 60 years, since the Burma Army's 1954-55 campaign led to the capture of the KNU's former capital at Hpapun town.⁵

The last waves of widespread armed conflict and forced relocations in Mutraw took place between 1992-1993, 1995-1997 and 2005-2008. During these campaigns the Burma Army built a network of military operations roads across Luthaw Township, designed to supply military bases and act as barriers to both Karen villagers and KNLA troops. Throughout this period, the Burma Army designated Luthaw as a "black area,"⁶ where they "treated all individuals, villages, and food supplies as legitimate military targets."⁷ These brutal military campaigns resulted in the forced displacement of more than eighty percent of the district's original 107,000 inhabitants,⁸ with many fleeing to refugee camps along the Thai border, while others chose to live in hiding in the forests.

During the 1992-1993 campaign, the Burma Army extended an east-west military operations road from Muthey in Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District to Saw Hta on the Salween River at the border with Thailand. Between 1997 and 2001, the Burma Army cut a north-south military operations road to Ler Mu Plaw from Phwa Ghaw village, at the junction of the east-west Muthey road. During the large-scale 2005 and 2008 offensives, the Burma Army extended this road northward from Ler Mu Plaw through Kay Pu village tract to Bu Hsa Hkee village in Toungoo District, where it linked to the Toungoo-Mawchi road.

Prior to 2005, Burma Army troops had been forced to withdraw from northwestern Luthaw during the monsoon season; however, the new north-south road enabled them to carry out military operations throughout the year. Although the Burma Army scaled back the intensity of its offensives in Luthaw towards the end of 2008, more than 27,000 villagers remained displaced from their land and homes in 2010, where they remained "at constant risk of death or injury from periodic attacks, patrols and remote shelling."⁹

The Burma Army's attempts to extend the road between Ler Mu Plaw and Kay Pu were fiercely contested by the KNLA's 5th Brigade, which has been "able to maintain these 'northern areas' as the most autonomous region under Karen control,"¹⁰ a region that "has never been brought under centralized state rule."¹¹ In early 2009 the KNLA retook control of the area, and by late 2011 Burma Army troops no longer used this segment of the road. Although the Burma Army was forced to withdraw from its patrol camps along the old roadway, they consolidated their forces at their two major military bases in Kay Pu and Ler Mu Plaw.

⁵ Smith, Martin (1991) *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity*, p.154

⁶ The Burma Army counter-insurgency doctrine views territory as black, brown or white according to the extent of Ethnic Armed Organizations' (EAO) activity. A "black area" denotes "an area controlled by insurgents but where the Burma Army operates;" a "brown area" denotes "a Burma Army-controlled area where insurgents operate;" while a "white area" is territory which has been "cleared" of EAO activity. See KHRG report, *Truce or Transition?* (2014: 26 fn. 39)

⁷ KHRG "Hpapun (Mutraw) District", Accessible at; <http://khr.org/reports/location/41>

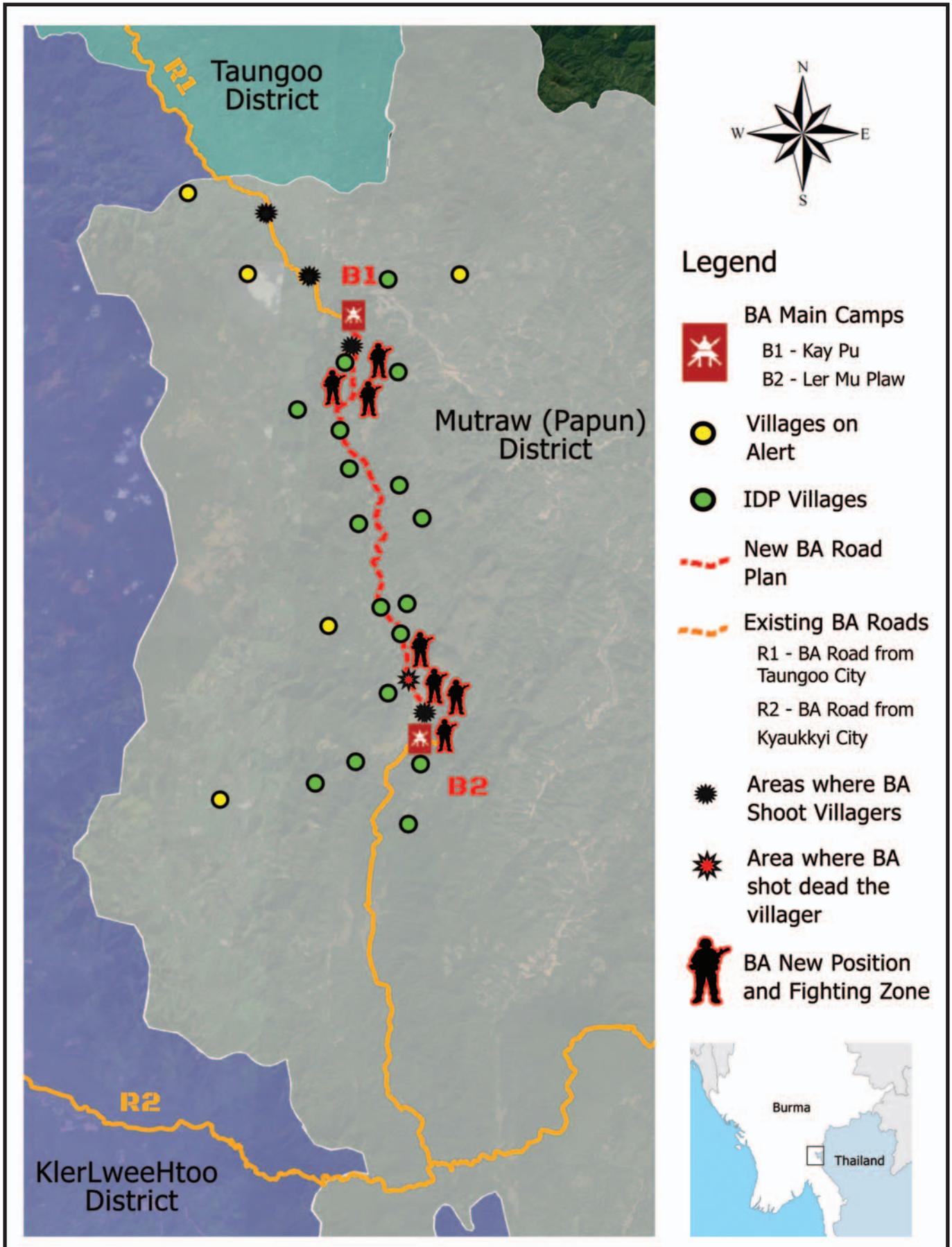
⁸ Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) figure presented at "Symposium on the Salween Dams" June 27, 2003; estimated figure provided by KNU's Mutraw District Administration; as cited in Karen Rivers Watch (KRW) (2004) *Damming at Gunpoint*, p. 1, p. 42

⁹ Feeding figures provided by the Karen Office of Relief and Development (KORD) to KHRG. See KHRG report, *Self-protection under strain* (2010: 21)

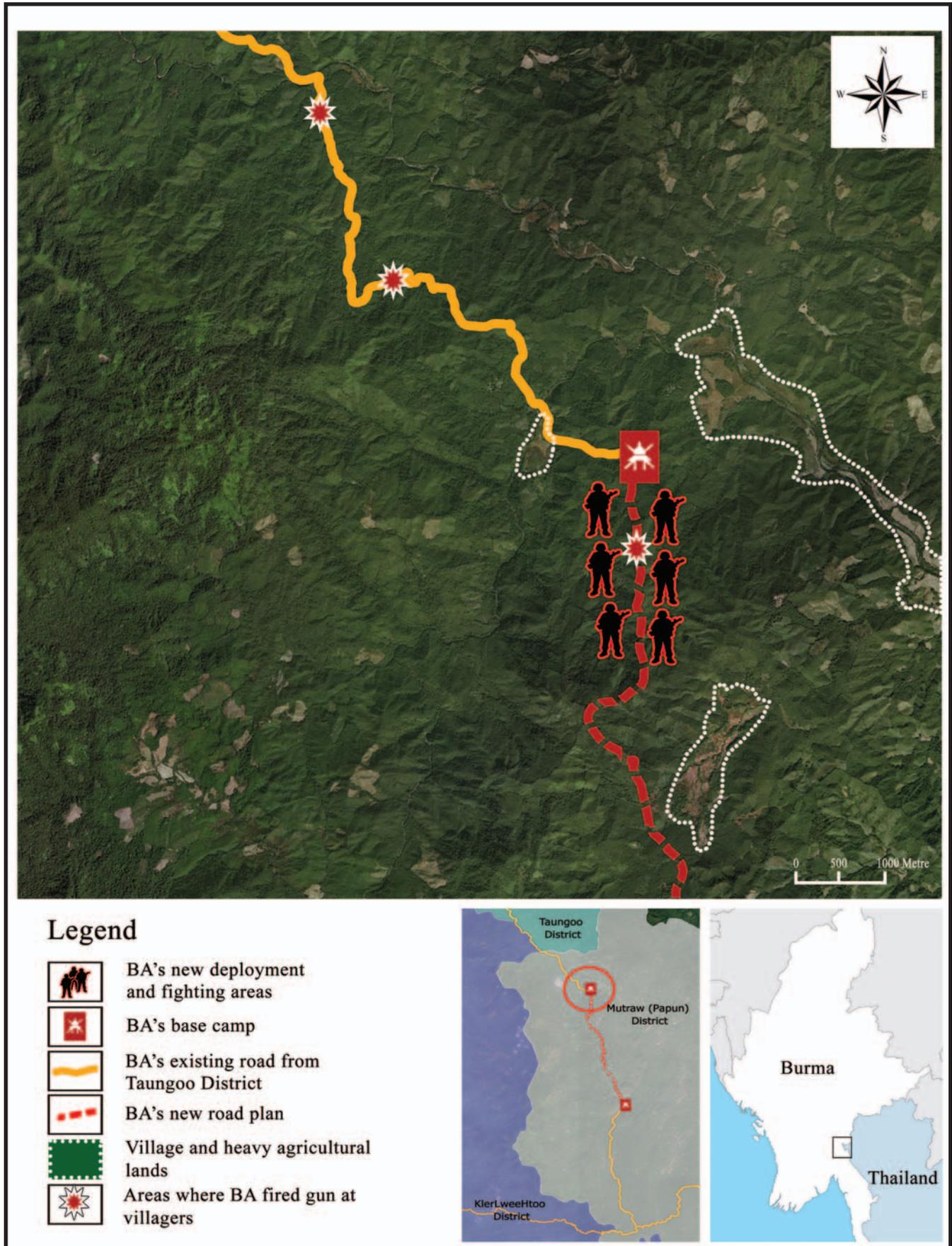
¹⁰ Joliffe, Kim (2016) "Ceasefire, Governance and Development" *The Asia Foundation* p. 34

¹¹ Joliffe, Kim (2016) p. 9

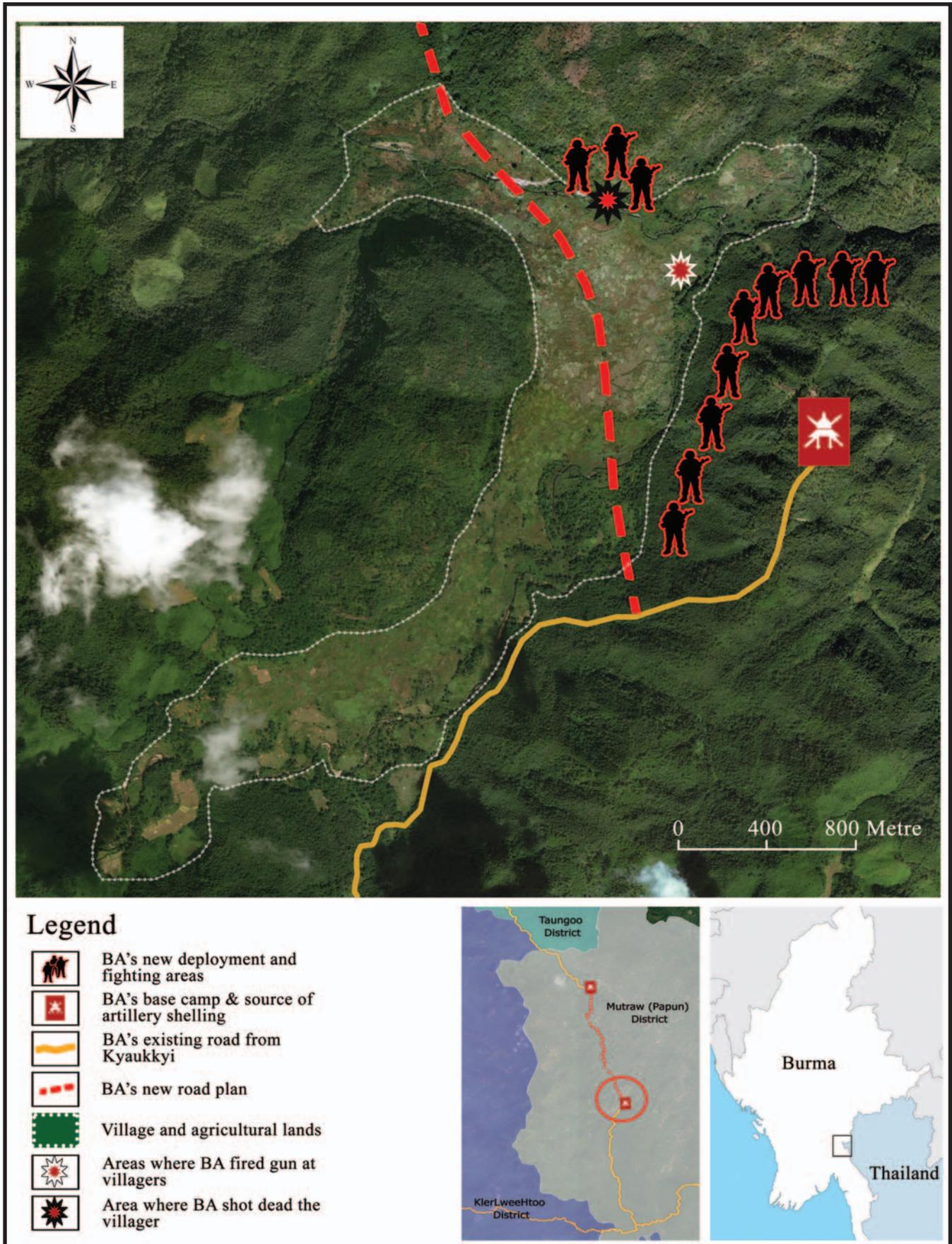
Map of Recent Conflict in Mutraw District and IDP Situation



BA's New Troop Deployment, The Fightings, and Effects on Local Villagers (Kay Pu Area, Mutraw District, Kawthoolei)



BA's New Troop Deployment, The Fightings, and Effects on Local Villagers (Ler Mu Plaw Area, Mutraw District, Kawthoolei)



Mutraw since the 2015 NCA

We don't want our children to face the nightmare, and the situation that we have faced. We want a better life for them, whichever life they choose, we want them to have a better life than we have. Whether they get an education or stay here on the farm, we want them to be able to live in peace and not have to flee like we have.

- Saw Pyo Say, Htee Bway Kee village, Nov 26, 2016, unpublished KPSN field interview -

In January 2012, the Burmese government and KNU signed a bilateral ceasefire agreement. During negotiations, the KNLA demanded that the Burma Army withdraw 17 military bases from Mutraw - including Kay Pu and Ler Mu Plaw - in order to improve security for local villagers and facilitate return of displaced people to their homelands and ancestral village territories. However, since the 2012 ceasefire the Burma Army has steadily upgraded and reinforced its bases,¹² creating more permanent military infrastructure.

Even though the ceasefire talks are ongoing, the Burma Army keep sending up more troops and military rations in our area instead of withdrawing. This could be the sign of preparations for the next operation. So, we villagers have to be ready to run in different ways instead of thinking about uniting and building a village.

- Karen Man, Mutraw District, June 2012, KORD interview -¹³

In October 2015, the KNU became one of only two major Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) to sign the NCA. Although both the text of the NCA and the process for its implementation remain unclear, the NCA prohibits military offensives, expansion of military infrastructure, and troop reinforcements in ceasefire areas. Article 7 of the NCA requires that both parties “confine their troops within the designated areas,” while Article 8 further stipulates that the “movement of armed troops in the areas controlled by the other is allowed only after obtaining prior agreement.” However, the 2015 NCA does not clearly demarcate territorial boundaries between ceasefire parties.

In accordance with the text of the NCA, and to prevent armed confrontations and build trust during peace negotiations, the KNLA's 5th Brigade clarified territorial boundaries between their troops and those of the Burma Army. These protocols clearly define limits for Burma Army troop movements, restricting the movement of trucks and heavy machinery to clearly defined areas, restricting troop movements to specific boundaries marked on either side of existing paths and roads, also marking boundaries for boat travel on the Salween River. In the case of northern Luthaw township, these protocols prohibit Burma Army trucks from traveling south of Bu Hsa Hkee camp and north of Pwah Gaw on the north-south road.

The Burma Army has frequently disregarded these protocols and ignored the KNLA's warnings, encroaching on 5th Brigade territory and transporting large trucks beyond the points demarcated by the KNLA. In February 2017, four large Burma Army trucks arrived at Ler Mu Plaw military base, without prior agreement from the KNLA as required under the NCA. In January 2018, similar violations by the Burma Army provoked at least two armed clashes with KNLA soldiers.

¹² Between 2012 and 2017, the Burma Army increased its military bases in Mutraw, bringing the total from 65 to 78, while reinforcing existing installations.

¹³ The Border Consortium (TBC) (2012: 28)



Villagers harvesting rice, Ler Mu Plaw. Photo: Andrew Paul (KPSN)

Luthaw Karen communities rebuild during the ceasefire period

Despite the ongoing presence of the Burma Army in Mutraw, the 2012 ceasefire and 2015 NCA raised local people's hopes that they could finally begin returning to their ancestral homelands and village territories on a permanent basis. However, villagers continued to avoid any contact with the Burma Army and their network of military roads, which still posed a threat to local people. Saw Maw Kay, a local community leader, was shot to death by Burma Army soldiers near the road in Ler Mu Plaw on February 22nd, 2015.

Although the local security situation remained uncertain, the Karen people of northwestern Luthaw began meeting following the 2012 ceasefire to discuss how they would begin rebuilding their communities. Displaced villagers began the arduous task of repairing irrigation canals and clearing their overgrown fields in Ler Mu Plaw, a 900-acre expanse of irrigated paddy fields which had lain abandoned since the Burma Army offensives of 1997. By 2017, large areas of Ler Mu Plaw had been rehabilitated, except for some areas near the existing Burma Army road from Phwa Ghaw. Beginning in 2013, people also began farming once again near the old abandoned Burma Army track between Ler Mu Plaw and Kay Pu.¹⁴

At first, people only returned temporarily to farm in places like Ler Mu Plaw, maintaining their permanent dwellings in safer locations further from Burma Army military bases and roads. However, by 2016, as the ceasefire seemed to be holding, Karen villagers began re-establishing ancestral villages such as Ler Mu Plaw, Htee Bway Kee, Sho Ber Hko, Baw Nah Der, and others. Primary schools and health clinics were established.

Local Indigenous Karen people of Mutraw are now working to develop the Salween Peace Park, which articulates local people's vision for genuine lasting peace, self-determination, and community-driven development, while promoting the stewardship and protection of the unique natural and cultural heritage of the region. Luthaw communities have been closely involved in developing the 5,485-sq. km Peace Park.

¹⁴ www.freeburmarangers.org/2018/03/15/running-time-babies-1700-villagers-flee-burma-army-attacks-builds-roads-northern-karen-state/

The Salween Peace Park consolidates over 10 years of work by Indigenous Karen communities in Mutraw District to protect their waters, lands, and forests. The heart of the Peace Park initiative is the *Kaw*, or Indigenous Karen village territory. Strong spiritual ties bind Karen villagers to their *Kaw*, and since 2012 Indigenous Karen leaders in Luthaw have begun reviving ancient ceremonies and *Kaw* stewardship practices. Luthaw communities have formally demarcated 88 *Kaw* territories, covering 447,200 acres, a process that is ongoing. They have also established 23 community forests to protect some of the last remaining old-growth forest and endangered species habitat in southeast Burma, all under the care and stewardship of local Indigenous Karen communities.

In sum, local people have not been idly waiting for the Burmese government and KNU leaders to negotiate their political rights and federal democracy during the ceasefire time. They have been busy exercising local community democracy, rebuilding their villages, farms, education systems, and customary *Kaw* land administrations. At a public consultation in December 2017, Salween Peace Park planners initiated a campaign to collect signatures of support from the park's 70,000 inhabitants. Karen villagers in Luthaw have dared to hope and work for a future in which they could live in peace in their own homelands and ancestral village territories.

Now, the Burma Army's plan to expand their military operations road threatens to permanently displace at least 350 families from their lands. All the work that people have done to restore their villages, farmlands, and customary land stewardship systems is now in jeopardy.

Luthaw 2018 conflict update: Roadmap to (re)militarization

On December 25th, 2017, the Burma Army's Southern Division Military Headquarters in Toungoo sent a letter notifying KNLA Headquarters and the KNLA's 5th Brigade of its plans to upgrade the road network servicing their military camps in northwestern Luthaw, without first consulting with relevant KNU or KNLA authorities, as required under the NCA. Knowing that the road will be used by the Burma Army as a military operations road, the KNLA's 5th Brigade rejected the Burma Army's unilateral decision to expand the road.

In mid-February, villagers in Mutraw noticed the arrival of Burma Army reinforcements in the Kay Pu and Ler Mu Plaw areas. Burma Army soldiers twice shot at unsuspecting villagers crossing the road near Kay Pu: once on February 27th near Ta Keh Der village, and once on March 1st near Kaw Ter Der village.¹⁵

Three days later, on March 4th, four Burma Army battalions arrived from Kyauk Kyi and took offensive positions beyond their military base at Ler Mu Plaw. An additional two battalions from Toungoo simultaneously advanced beyond Kay Pu military base to the north. This large-scale and coordinated deployment of Burma Army troops into KNU-controlled areas took place without the prior agreement of the KNLA's 5th Brigade, in clear violation of Articles 7 and 8 of the 2015 NCA. The lack of prior agreement from the KNLA and the Burma Army's military-first solution breaches the very spirit of the NCA which calls for "political dialogue instead of force of arms."¹⁶

Villagers from Kay Pu, Ler Mu Plaw and Saw Mu Plaw village tracts received news that the Burma Army was moving into the area and began fleeing their villages during the night of March 4th. On March 11th, six additional Burma Army trucks carrying over 200 troops were observed arriving at Kay Pu military base. On April 9th, more Burma Army troops arrived in trucks from both the north and south into the Kay Pu and Ler Mu Plaw areas.

¹⁵ FBR report, They Are Running Again, This Time With Babies, 15 March 2018, accessible at: www.freeburmarangers.org/2018/03/15/running-time-babies-1700-villagers-flee-burma-army-attacks-builds-roads-northern-karen-state/

¹⁶ NCA (2015) Article 1(b)

On March 16th, 2018, the KNU Supreme Headquarters released a statement¹⁷ denouncing the Burma Army for “breaching the terms of the NCA” with regards to its military operations in Mutraw. The KNU statement called on the Burma Army to

... cease its military activities as a way of demonstrating trust building. In practice, to withdraw the Military Operations Commands (MOCs) and the battalions under them, which have been sent for road building, and to guarantee security for the Internally Displaced Karen people, seeking refuge away from fighting to return to their homes.

By March 15th, reports confirmed¹⁸ that the Burma Army had brought trucks and bulldozers into the area in preparation to expand the old road way, at which time over 1,700 villagers had fled. According to the Mutraw Emergency Assistance Team (MEAT), 12 villages and more than 2,400 people are now displaced, while approximately 500 people in four villages remain on high alert and prepared to flee (See Appendix 1). Thus, it appears the Burma Army has also breached Article 9 of the NCA, which calls on parties to the agreement to “avoid the forcible displacement or relocation of local populations.”

Between March 4th and April 10th, the Burma Army’s troop movements provoked at least 37 armed clashes as KNLA soldiers fought to contain the Burma Army troops within areas delimited under KNLA protocols. More clashes occurred near Kay Pu on April 17th and Ler Mu Plaw on April 20th. As this report was going to press, Burma Army troops in the Ler Mu Plaw area appear to have pulled back to defensive positions at their military base. However, tensions in the area remain high, and the Burma Army reinforcements have not yet returned to their main bases in Kyauk Kyi and Toungoo.

“We worry about fighting happening again at any moment, so we have to keep our soldiers prepared,” explained the Commander-in-Chief of the KNLA, Saw Johnny, in a recent interview. “How can we trust the Myanmar government and military?”¹⁹

So far, the KNU’s Military Affairs Negotiation Team (MANT) has tried to resolve current tensions in Mutraw through the existing mechanism under the NCA, the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC). However, the Burma Army cancelled the JMC meeting scheduled for March 29th, blaming the absence of the KNLA 5th Brigade commander. KNU Headquarters responded with an April 2nd statement, reiterating that although the 5th Brigade commander is not a member of MANT, this body is authorized to represent the KNU/KNLA in negotiations over military affairs. The KNU also reaffirmed its commitment to resolve the current conflict through peaceful negotiations.

On April 19th, the KNLA’s 5th Brigade released a statement responding to persistent Burma Army demands for the KNLA to stop hindering their military road-building activities. In this statement, the KNLA called attention to the Burma Army’s violations of the NCA and declared that they would continue to oppose the Burma Army’s actions to exploit the ceasefire and expand its military control, causing forced displacement, killings, and human rights violations against the local Indigenous Karen people. The KNLA reaffirmed its commitment to maintaining the ceasefire and working toward lasting peace.

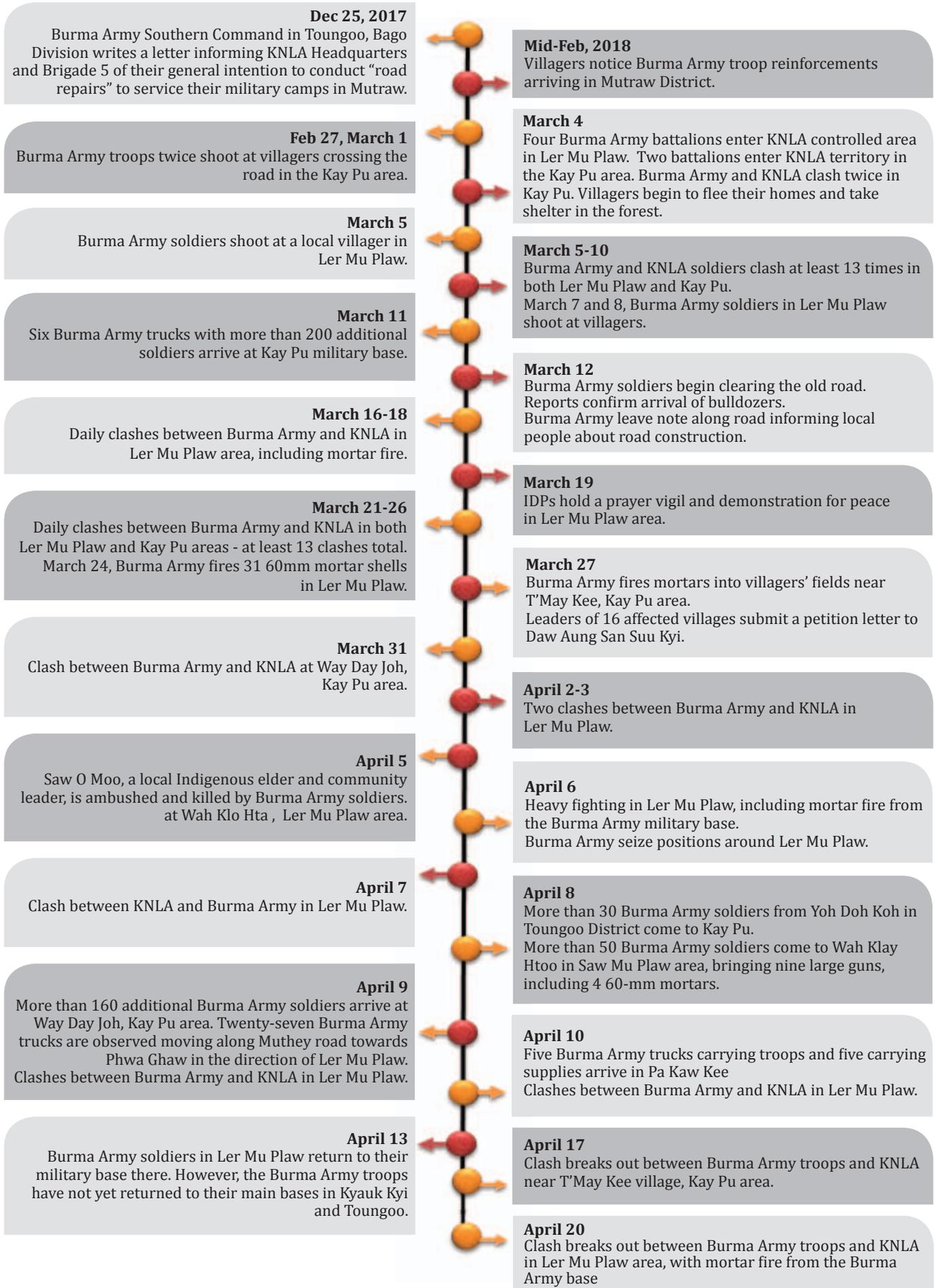
So far, the Burma Army has refused to withdraw its troops from Ler Mu Plaw and Kay Pu areas. This failure to resolve tensions through peaceful negotiations, under agreements reached through the NCA, continues to put the lives of civilians at risk, threatening an escalation of armed conflict in a region struggling for peace.

¹⁷ KNU Supreme Headquarters Kawthoolei “Karen National Union Position Statement on Tatmadaw military activities in sending military forces into Mutraw District (Papun) to build a road base for military use, during the implementation of the ceasefire” March 16th, 2018

¹⁸ FBR report, They Are Running Again, This Time With Babies, 15 March 2018, accessible at: <http://www.freeburmarangers.org/2018/03/15/running-time-babies-1700-villagers-flee-burma-army-attacks-builds-roads-northern-karen-state/>

¹⁹ Hay, Wayne, “Stalled Peace Process in Myanmar frustrating rebel armies” Al Jazeera, 7th April 2018. Accessible at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/stalled-peace-process-myanmar-frustrating-rebel-armies-180407121706841.html>

Conflict Timeline





Displaced villagers at their forest hiding place. Photo: Brennan O'Connor

Impacts on local villagers

Civilians always suffer the most during times of armed conflict, and the ongoing Burma Army military operation in Luthaw Township is no exception. Although Karen villagers in this area have experienced repeated waves of Burma Army violence since at least the 1970s, the psychological impact of the current conflict is made more severe by the fact that this is happening under the NCA.

“Can the NCA solve this problem?” asked Saw O Moo, a local villager and Indigenous leader from Ler Mu Plaw. “Or do we need to prepare for a return to civil war?”

Tragically, Saw O Moo was killed by Burma Army soldiers near his home in Ler Mu Plaw on April 5th, 2018.

KPSN collected the following information concerning human rights abuses and the impact of the conflict on local villagers:

- Shooting of unarmed villagers and mortar shelling of civilian areas.
- Forced displacement of over 2,400 people.
- Disruption of villagers’ agricultural activities and threat of food insecurity.
- Military road construction and permanent displacement of villagers from ancestral territories.

Shooting of civilians

Since February 27th, Burma Army soldiers have shot at villagers on at least six separate occasions, also shelling civilian areas with mortar fire on at least 8 occasions.

Saw O Moo



Saw O Moo and his family at their home, Ler Mu Plaw. Photo: Hsar Doe Doh Moo (KPSN)

On April 5th, 2018, Burma Army troops shot and killed Saw O Moo, a local villager and Indigenous Karen leader, near his home in the Ler Mu Plaw area. At the time of Saw O Moo's death, he was travelling home from a community meeting to coordinate humanitarian assistance for the newly-displaced villagers.

Saw O Moo will be remembered for his life-long commitment to preserving Indigenous Karen cultural traditions, promoting customary land stewardship, and leading local community forest conservation activities as the Luthaw Paw Day Community Forest Coordinator. At the time of his death, Saw O Moo was serving on the Kheshorter Community Forest Committee as an Advisor and Indigenous Wildlife Researcher. He was also a member the Salween Peace Park Committee.

Saw O Moo was 42 years old, and he is survived by his wife Naw Paw Tha and their 7 young children. Saw O Moo's death is a sad reminder that Indigenous Karen villagers in Luthaw Township are still not safe in their own ancestral territories.

"We are very afraid of the Burma Army. Now they have come into our area to build a road, so we have to flee into the jungle. My husband and I had to be apart, and now he has been killed. It breaks my heart that we will never see him again."

- Naw Paw Tha -

The Burma Army's indiscriminate targeting of the civilian population is consistent with past patterns of abuse perpetrated in the context of decades of military offensives against the Indigenous Karen people of northwestern Luthaw. As Burma Army troops seize and reinforce positions along the old roadway between Ler Mu Plaw and Kay Pu, the physical and food insecurity of local villagers will increase.

Forced displacement

More than 2,400 villagers, including elders, women and children, have fled their homes in the Kay Pu, Ler Mu Plaw and Saw Mu Plaw village tracts. These communities are now hiding in the forest. Approximately 500 people are also preparing to flee their villages as the Burma Army attempt to reinforce their positions in northwestern Luthaw (See Appendix 1).

Local people were forced to flee their villages with little warning, so they were only able to carry limited supplies with them. In this mountainous region it is cold at night, and displaced villagers do not have sufficient warm clothing or blankets. Unseasonable rains have fallen in the area, causing further hardship for IDPs who lack proper shelters. Displaced villagers also face imminent food shortages.

Especially among children and the elderly, the cold temperatures, rain, lack of proper shelter, and inadequate diet have resulted in sicknesses such as colds, fevers, and gastrointestinal illnesses. Medicines are in short supply. Some displaced villagers are also suffering from the trauma of being forcibly displaced by armed conflict yet again.

Five schools have been forced to close due to the fighting. If the Burma Army does not withdraw before classes begin in June, hundreds of students will be unable to attend school this year.

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity has remained the most acute problem confronting displaced communities in northern Luthaw Township. The high mountain forests where IDPs have traditionally taken shelter are marginal for growing rice. Speaking to a KPSN field researcher in November 2016, Saw O Moo's wife Naw Paw Tha emphasized that since she and her family had returned to farm their land in Ler Mu Plaw, in 2012, they had enjoyed much better food security compared to their years as IDPs in the high mountains. Naw Paw Tha is among the villagers now forced to flee once again to the forest.

According to KPSN interviews with local villagers, the Burma Army's expansion of the roadway between Kay Pu and Ler Mu Plaw will affect up to 245-275 irrigated lowland paddy farms. The seasonal harvest from these farms feed at least 2,000 to 3,000 people annually. If the Burma Army does not withdraw its troops and cease road construction activities, villagers will not be able to plough and plant their lowland paddy fields before the rains in May and will face long-term food insecurity.

April is the time that villagers normally prepare upland fields (*taungya*) for cultivation. Villagers from over 300 households forced to flee the Burma Army troop deployments into northwestern Luthaw now cannot finish preparing their upland farms and may not be able to plant a crop before the monsoon rains arrive this year.

As villagers face growing uncertainty for their future, they continue to press for peace. On March 19th, Indigenous Karen villagers in the conflict area held prayer vigils and demonstrations for peace, the withdrawal of Burma Army troops from their ancestral village territories, and a halt to the road construction. On March 27th, Indigenous leaders of 16 affected villages submitted a petition requesting the State Counsellor's intervention.

Long-term threat to local villagers' lives, livelihoods, and IDP/refugee return

Major General Myat Kyaw, Burma Army Southern Command, claimed that the north-south road will be “for administrative purposes only, not for military operations”, while a statement released from the Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Burma Army stated that it is being built “for local villagers’ use” and “local development.”²⁰

While these statements from the highest levels of the Burma Army suggest the current road is being expanded to improve the livelihoods of local people, the ground reality in Luthaw contradicts these claims. The fundamental purpose of the Burma Army’s road network in Luthaw is to resupply and reinforce bases, strengthen military communications, and launch more rapid offensives and patrols. These roads and patrols, combined with the Burma Army’s often indiscriminate targeting of civilians in Luthaw Township has made any contact with Burma Army roads a highly dangerous exercise for local villagers. Rather than connecting villages, these roads act as barriers restricting people’s movements, such as villagers accessing their farms, medics delivering health care, aid workers bringing food, and children going to school.²¹ Thus, it is difficult to see how these military operations roads can possibly support “local development.”

“We don’t want the Burmese soldiers to come here and build this military road,” Naw Pwe, an elderly woman from Ler Mu Plaw, told KPSN field researchers. “We just want them to let us live in peace.”

Conclusion

KPSN’s findings indicate that the Burma Army’s military operations and road construction activities in Mutraw have severe short-term and long-term consequences for Indigenous Karen villagers in this area. The Burma Army has shot at villagers and launched mortar attacks, endangering villagers’ lives, personal security, and food security. These actions threaten to permanently displace Indigenous Karen villagers from their ancestral homelands and village territories, undermining local people’s efforts to restore their villages, farmlands, and customary land stewardship systems. Burma Army attacks and road construction also threaten community initiatives to protect the forests and biodiversity remaining in this part of Karen State.

Finally, the Burma Army’s actions erode local villagers’ trust in the peace process and in fact sabotage local people’s efforts to build genuine peace, including the Salween Peace Park initiative. The United Nations Human Rights Council expressed its concerns about ceasefire violations by the Burma Army against signatory groups during its 37th session in March 2018. While the Burma Army continues to use the NCA as a tool to crush ethnic peoples and their political aspirations for equality and self-determination, genuine peace will remain elusive in Burma.

As long as the Burma Army refuses to honour ceasefire agreements, encroaches on villagers’ ancestral territories, and expands its military infrastructure in Karen State, it will remain impossible to guarantee safe return for hundreds of thousands of Karen refugees and IDPs throughout Karen State and on the Thai-Burma border.

²⁰ Statement from Office of the Commander-in-Chief of the Burma Army, Nay Pyi Taw, April 10th, 2018

²¹ FBR 2013 www.freeburmarangers.org/2013/01/31/northern-mu-traw-district-karen-state-tense-peace-amidst-burma-army-road-and-camp-improvements/



Villagers demonstrate for peace, Ler Mu Plaw. Photo: Brennan O'Connor

Recommendations

To alleviate the humanitarian emergency facing newly-displaced villagers, promote genuine and lasting peace, protect the heritage of Indigenous Karen people of Mutraw District, and guarantee the safe return of Karen refugees and IDPs to their homelands and ancestral village territories, KPSN makes the following recommendations:

1. The Burma Army must uphold the military code of conduct established under the NCA and withdraw all troops that have entered KNU controlled areas since March 4th, 2018;
2. KNU leaders, the Burma Army, and the Burmese government should establish an independent third-party investigation to resolve the ongoing tensions and conflict in Mutraw;
3. The Burma army must cease all road construction activities in KNU controlled areas that have been pursued without prior agreement from the KNU;
4. During the current interim period, in the absence of a secure peace agreement and political guarantees, all road construction for local development should be decided and implemented by local Indigenous Karen people and relevant KNU authorities;
5. KNU leaders and the Burma Army must prioritize the timely withdrawal of Burma Army military camps from Indigenous Karen people's ancestral village territories, to allow displaced Karen to restore their villages, farmlands, and customary land stewardship systems;
6. Governments and non-governmental organizations at all levels must respect and acknowledge the administrative and governing structures of KNU authorities and Indigenous Karen communities on their own ancestral territories;
7. International actors should continue delivering humanitarian aid for Karen refugees and IDPs through existing Karen community-based organizations.

Appendices

Appendix 1:

Figures for forced displacement

As a result of the Tatmadaw's actions, more than 2,400 villagers, including elders, women and children, have fled their homes and are taking temporary shelter in the forest, while more than 400 additional villagers are preparing to flee.

Villages that have fled						
Village Name	Number of Households	Village tract	Total Population			
			Male	female	total	
1. Taw Koo Mu Der	35	Kay Pu	134	146	280	
2. T'May Kee	10	Kay Pu	48	37	85	
3. ThayThoo Kee	38	Kay Pu	152	164	316	
4. Boh Nar Der	21	Kay Pu	83	74	157	
5. Sho Per Koh	48	Kay Pu	168	169	337	
6. Htee Li Kha Kee	19	Saw Mu Plaw	58	88	146	
7. Bee Koh Der	19	Saw Mu Plaw	64	63	127	
8. Blaw Koh	13	Saw Mu Plaw	40	55	95	
9. He Gho Loh Der	23	Ler Mu Plaw	107	102	209	
10. Ler Mu Plaw	50	Ler Mu Plaw	183	181	364	
11. Htee Khae Kee	17	Ler Mu Plaw	97	83	180	
12. Htee Hsee Kee	11	Kay Pu	63	58	121	
Total	304		1197	1220	2417	

Villages that have prepared to flee					
Village Name	Number of Households	Village tract	Total Population		
			Female	Male	total
1. Htee Bway Kee	15	Kay Pu	63	51	114
2. Theh Kee	29	Saw Mu Plaw	70	81	151
3. Theh Hsar Kee	18	Saw Mu Plaw	72	79	151
4. Hser Hti	10	Ler Mu Plaw	31	36	67
Total	72		236	247	483

Appendix 2:

KNLA 5th Brigade Protocols:

Designated areas within Mutraw to limit the movements of the Burma Army

Name of villages and towns linked by road or path	Burma Army movement restrictions either side of road or path (Yards)	Remark
Kamamaung – Kor Pu	200	Vehicle Road
May Pray Khee – Kho Thu Hta	300	Vehicle Road
Baw Ga Li – Bu Hsa Khee	50	Vehicle Road
Ler Doh – Phwa Ghaw	50	Vehicle Road
Kor Pu – Kyauk Nyat	200	Path
Ko Thwee Hta – Mae Wae	200	Path
Phwa Ghaw – to further military camps	50	Path
How Dor Ko – Kay Pu	50	Path
Thoo Moei Hta - Dagwin (Salween River)		Boat Route



*The Burma Army plans to transform this villagers' footpath into a military operations road.
Photo: Brennan O'Connor*



*Displaced villagers cook at their forest hiding place.
Photo: Soe Doe (KPSN)*



*Children forced to flee their homes.
Photo: Brennan O'Connor*



*Girls care for younger siblings under a makeshift shelter.
Photo: Soe Doe (KPSN)*



*Woman and her daughter carry heavy bags of rice as they leave their village.
Photo: Soe Doe (KPSN)*



Photo: Brennan O'Connor

“

We urgently need genuine peace and freedom. We do not want the Burma Army to build roads through our Indigenous territories. We will decide our own destiny.

”

ABOUT KPSN

Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN) is the largest network of Karen civil society organizations in Burma/Myanmar. KPSN member organizations have facilitated humanitarian support for vulnerable conflict-affected Karen communities, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugees for decades. KPSN works to empower local Karen communities, raise awareness of the peace process, document human rights issues, and facilitate advocacy for a sustainable and equitable peace in Karen areas of Burma.

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KPSN thanks the Burma Relief Centre (BRC) for financially supporting the publication of this report.