



Media release from the Salween Peace Park

For Immediate release, 3rd April 2020

As the world struggles with COVID 19, the Burma Army continues to kill Karen civilians with impunity in the Salween Peace Park

On 31st March 2020, at 6:50 PM, a group of villagers were on their way home after buying rice and other goods. As the group was crossing a Burma Army Road in the Saw Mu Plaw area of Luthaw Township in the Salween Peace Park, Burmese soldiers opened fire and killed Saw Thet Mee, a 56 years-old community forest leader in Kaw Thay Ghu, an Indigenous Karen customary territory in the Salween Peace Park. The villagers have not yet been able to retrieve Saw Thet Mee's body, as Burmese soldiers continue to patrol the area. Saw Thet Mee is survived by his wife and five children.

Saw Thet Mee was very active in the community and he served as the Deputy Chair for the Kaw Thay Ghu Judicial Committee. This is the second time since January that Burmese soldiers have openly murdered a civilian in northern Karen State's Mutraw District. On March 5, Saw Maw Aye Than, a Forest Ranger, was shot and killed at Mae Way, Dweh Loh Township, Mutraw District, while he was traveling to conduct a routine wildlife patrol in the Klermu Thoopli Wildlife Sanctuary. In a few days, April 5th will mark two years since Salween Peace Park leader and environmental defender Saw O Moo was also shot and killed by Burmese Army soldiers near his home in Ler Mu Plaw.

Since January 2020, at least fifteen Burma Army battalions have been deployed in Luthaw Township to construct a military road without the consent of local villagers or the Karen National Union (KNU). During the current ceasefire agreement and ongoing peace talks between the KNU and Burmese Government, the Mutraw District KNU and local villagers reject all proposed mega development projects until a genuine peace agreement is in place. Despite this clear stance, the Burma Army has pressed forward with the military road construction, provoking numerous clashes with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) - the KNU's armed wing.

The Burma Army continues to violate terms of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement as it deploys more troops into KNU territories; fires artillery indiscriminately at farmlands, grazing areas and near villages; and kills Karen civilians with impunity. A total of 50 highland farms and 500 acres of forests- including community forests- have been burned without any notice or reason by the Burmese soldiers during this dry season. In total, the KNU Mutraw authorities are reporting that 367 villagers are currently displaced; 725 villagers were previously displaced and have since returned home; while another 5,661 villagers are currently at imminent risk of being displaced by the fighting and artillery shelling. With the Burma Army's destruction of highland farms, these villages are now in great danger of food shortages during the upcoming rainy season.

The presence and actions of the Burma Army also further endanger villagers' lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Communities within the Salween Peace Park have very limited access to medical equipment and facilities necessary to protect them from the virus in the Salween Peace Park, and if medical staff cannot visit them to share information and monitor the situation, the virus could more easily be spread. On March 23, UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated that refugees and those displaced by violent conflict are especially vulnerable to

the ongoing pandemic. Thus, he called for an immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world. On March 26, the KNU also released a statement urging the Burmese government and military to declare an unconditional ceasefire over the whole country. Yet the Burma Army refuses to heed these calls, continuing its offensives to force through a military road, endangering the Indigenous Karen people of the Salween Peace Park.

The murder of Saw Thet Mee represents the loss of yet another visionary Karen community leader. The Salween Peace Park Governing Committee urges the Burma Army to immediately stop road construction leading to further conflict and displacement, and to demilitarize the areas near Karen communities in the Salween Peace Park, so that, during this time of world-crisis, our Karen Indigenous people can feel secure to access and provide food for their families, and be able to protect themselves from COVID-19 as instructed by the World Health Organization.

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