

VIRUS WARFARE:

Burma Army destruction of Karen community defences against Covid-19



Since March 2020, the Karen National Union (KNU) has been organizing a widespread campaign to protect communities in their areas against Covid-19. They have organised virus prevention trainings for health personnel in each district, and distributed protective materials and thermometers. These personnel have conducted health awareness campaigns, and, together with local communities, set up screening checkpoints on key access roads for anyone entering their areas.

This rapid mobilizing was made possible by the KNU health department's long experience in developing responsive, culturally appropriate programming in rural areas, as necessitated by decades of civil war and structural flaws in the Burmese government health system – whose rigid centralized approach has proven woefully inefficient and unaccountable in addressing basic health needs of ethnic populations.

By April, the KNU Covid-19 Response Team had set up 49 screening posts in seven districts, including along the Thai-Burma border.

But in the last week of April, the Burma Army began shutting down these Karen screening posts. Four posts were ordered shut in Doothahtoo (Thaton) district (KNU Brigade 1), and on May 6, the Burma Army set fire to two checkpoints in southern Mutraw (Hpa-pun) district (KNU Brigade 5), causing armed clashes with the KNU and displacing over 480 villagers from Wa Tho Khoh village, where the Burma Army had shot and injured two elderly civilians in January this year. . On June 2, another screening post was destroyed by the Burma Army in Kler Lwe Htoo (Nyaunglebin) district (KNU Brigade 3).



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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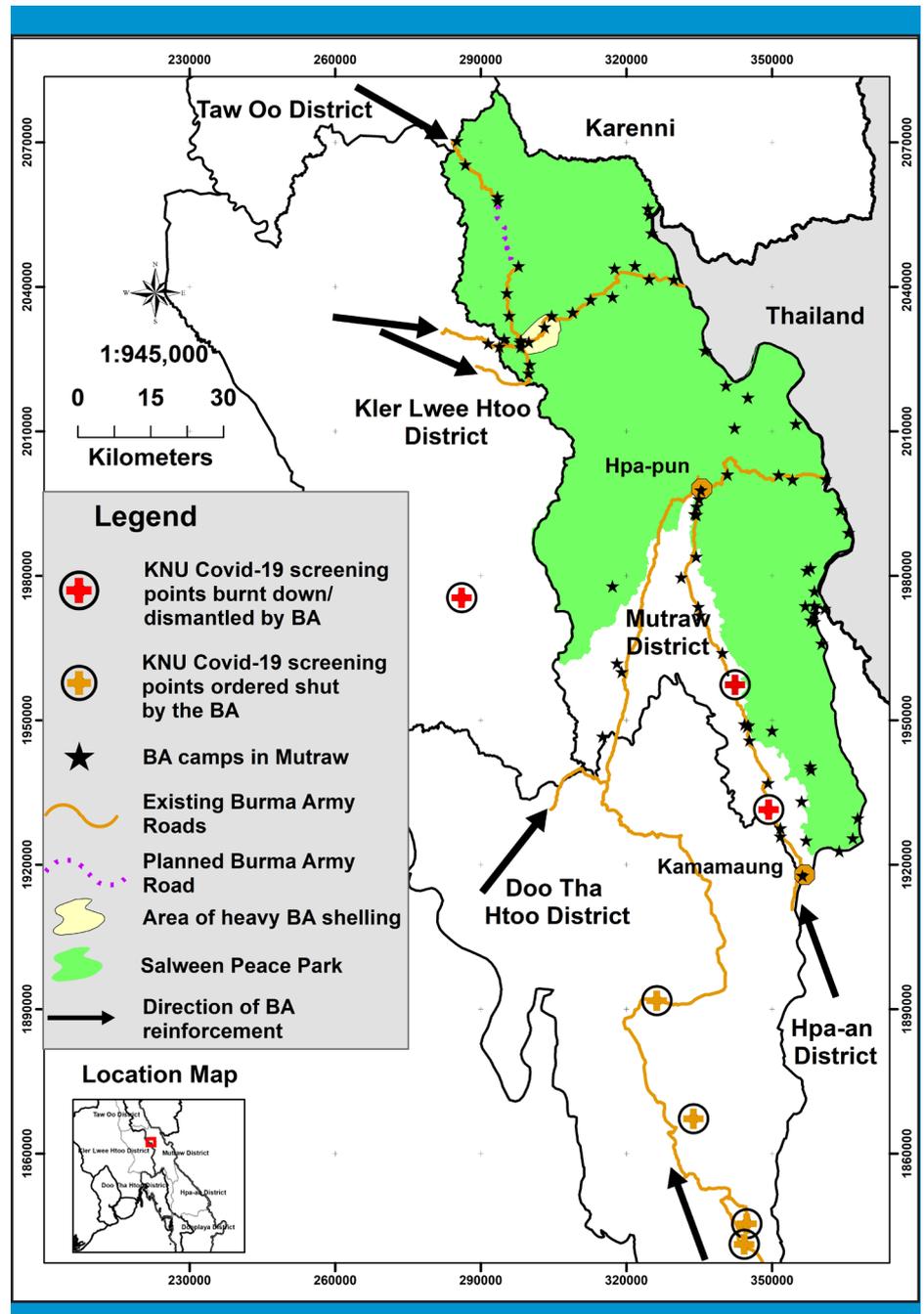
The two destroyed Mutraw checkpoints were on the main access road to Hpa-pun town, and were clearly removed for military purposes: to ensure quick deployment of Burma Army troops during their ongoing operations against KNU's Brigade 5, in violation of existing ceasefires.

There is now no health screening being carried out along the main road from Kamamaung to Hpa-pun, meaning an unfettered pathway for infection into central Mutraw.

KPSN strongly condemns the removal of these posts by the Burma Army, which violates the Karen people's right to protect their own health, and increases the risk of the spread of the disease -- already heightened by ongoing displacement from military attacks in Mutraw. This makes abundantly clear the hypocrisy of the Burmese government's claims to be "leaving no one behind" in their Covid-19 response.

The cruelty of destroying indigenous defences against a deadly pandemic is nothing new for the Burma Army, who have committed widespread, systematic crimes against the Karen for decades. What is new is that the Naypyidaw government now has the full, unconditional backing of the international community for its centrally controlled measures against Covid-19, meaning that foreign donors are effectively condoning and subsidizing the discriminatory national response -- including the military's trampling on ethnic peoples' right to protect their own health.

We call urgently on international donors to start making aid to the Burmese government conditional on an immediate end to Burma Army offensives throughout the country, so that this aid is not weaponized against the ethnic peoples, and the entire population can mobilize and be protected against the pandemic.



We also reiterate our call for international donors to provide cross-border aid directly to ethnic communities, including for their Covid-19 prevention programs, which are providing invaluable front-line defences for the entire country against the pandemic.

Details of Burma Army closure of KNU health screening posts

Doothahtoo (Thaton) district (KNU Brigade 1)

1. Burma Army Battalion 502 orders closure of three screening posts in Mos-Ko area

Mos-ko is an area of southern Doothahtoo district under the mixed-control of the KNU and the Burmese government. At the beginning of April, KNU-Doothahtoo opened 3 health screening points along main roads in the Mos-ko area, at the request of local communities,

as the Burmese government authorities were carrying out no screening measures. Major Aung Ko Ko, the deputy commander of Artillery Battalion 502 visited the screening sites several times from April 25-27 and threatened the Karen health workers. To avoid conflict, the KNU had to close down the three screening posts in this area on April 30, 2020. However, in the second week of May the three screening points were reopened by the Karen Youth Organisation in the area, despite ongoing threats from the Burma Army.

2. Burma Army Battalion 402 orders closure of screening post at Kaw Kya Thel (Toe Bo Lay)

Kaw Kya Thel (Toe Bo Lay) is another mixed-control area in central Doothahtoo district. On April 30, two columns of 50 troops from Burma Army Infantry Battalion 402, under Military Operation Command #8, came and ordered the KNU health workers and police to demolish and leave the screening post. Earlier that day, the wife of the Southeast Regional Commander, with several armed guards, had been stopped at the screening point on her way to a local monastery. Only the driver had got down to have his temperature taken and wash his hands, but she was very upset, and on her return home, complained to her husband that the KNU had stopped her car, falsely accusing them of firing guns.

To avoid conflict, the KNU took down the checkpoint for over a week, but resumed screening on May 10. Burma Army troops from Military Operations Command #3 then came back and ordered them to stop screening until they received permission from the government's National Reconciliation and Peace Centre (NRPC) committee set up on April 27 to coordinate with EAOs on Covid prevention. However, the KNU continued to run the screening point.

Mutraw District (KNU Brigade 5)

Burma Army Battalion 405 burns down two health screening points at Wa Tho Khoh and Pha Lo, sparking armed conflict with KNU

On May 6, 2020, troops of Burma Army Infantry Battalion 405 under Military Operation Command #8 came and destroyed the KNU's health screening points on the main road from Kamamaung to Hpa-pun town, at Wa Tho Khoh and Pha Lo in Dweh Lo Township, Mutraw district. They first chased out the Karen health workers and police at the posts, and then set fire to the bamboo structures.

This sparked fighting between the KNU and the Burma Army around Wa Tho Khoh village, and caused over 480 villagers from Wa Tho Khoh to flee their homes, fearful of being targeted by Burma Army troops, who had shot and injured two elderly Wa Tho Khoh villagers in January 2020.



KDHW health worker team taking temperature of travelers



KDHW providing TOT about Covid-19 awareness raising

Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District (KNU Brigade 3)

Burma Army Battalion 20 destroys screening post at Ter Khaw Gwee

On June 2, a KNU health screening post in Ter Khaw Gwee village, Saw Hti township, Kler Lwee Htoo District, was destroyed by troops of Burma Army LIB 20. This screening post had only just been set up that morning by the local Covid -19 response committee, and was destroyed in the evening. The Burma Army gave the reason that there had been no order from above to set up the screening post.