

TERROR FROM THE SKIES

Coup regime's escalated offensives cause mass displacement across Mutraw



Summary

Since the military coup on February 1, 2021, fierce air and ground offensives by the regime's troops in Mutraw (Papun) District of northern Karen State have inflicted dozens of civilian casualties, and displaced over 70,000 – nearly 90% of the district's entire rural population -- causing a dire humanitarian crisis.

While the regime has sought to blame the KNU's 5th Brigade for instigating the violence, this briefing paper provides historical background, showing that the latest attacks are simply an escalation of ongoing operations over decades to seize this strategic border region, irrespective of ceasefires.

In 1994, there were only 25 Burma Army camps in Mutraw, but, following repeated offensives and scorched earth operations, by the time the KNU signed a ceasefire in 2012, this number had increased to 65. In violation of ceasefire agreements, the Burma Army continued expansion into Mutraw, carrying out heavy shelling of civilian areas to push through access routes, and by 2020 there were over 80 camps in the district.

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.

May 2021

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During 2020, thousands of Mutraw villagers staged public protests calling for Burma Army troop withdrawal. In December 2020, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) Headquarters issued a statement demanding that the Burma Army withdraw from all villages in KNU-controlled areas by the year's end. The Burma Army ignored this and escalated artillery attacks, displacing over 5,300 villagers in Mutraw and adjacent areas of Kler Lwe Htoo (Nyaunglebin) by January 2021.

After the February 1 coup, the KNLA tightened its blockade of supply routes into Mutraw, and the regime continued heavy shelling, including from its Thee Mu Hta outpost on the Salween River, where shelling into surrounding areas caused displacement of hundreds of villagers. On March 27, the KNLA attacked and seized the Thee Mu Hta camp.

That night, for the first time in over 25 years, the regime launched airstrikes in Karen State, bombing the village of Day Bu Noh, in northern Mutraw, killing three and injuring ten people. Over the next five days, multiple airstrikes killed a further thirteen people and injured ten. Over 5,500 villagers fled across the Salween River into Thailand, but were pushed back within 2 days.

At the same time, the regime escalated artillery attacks along supply routes into Mutraw, causing over 7,600 people from 43 villages to flee and seek shelter in the jungle. Extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrests and looting sowed further terror, and in mid-April, the regime's troops started shooting at civilian boats sending supplies to IDPs along the Salween River. On April 27, to pre-empt further such attacks, the KNLA seized the Burma Army's Mae Ra Hta camp on the Salween, opposite the Thai village of Mae Sam Laep.

The regime again responded with air attacks. For six days, jets and helicopters dropped bombs and fired machine guns over eastern Mutraw, causing over 3,000 villagers to flee again across the river to Thailand. Artillery barrages and sporadic airstrikes continued across Mutraw, causing tens of thousands to flee to the jungle, but in the second week of May, the Thai authorities again pushed back the newly arrived refugees.

The regime's offensive in Mutraw appears set to intensify, with ongoing troop reinforcement and frequent flyovers of surveillance aircraft and drones. KPSN is gravely concerned that this will fuel further displacement and worsen the humanitarian crisis.

KPSN appeals to Thailand to abide by humanitarian principles, stop forcing refugees back to Burma, and to grant refuge and humanitarian access to all persons fleeing the ongoing attacks and persecution by the Burma Army.

KPSN calls urgently for the international community to impose a global arms embargo on Burma, cut off all forms of economic support for the military regime, and to provide urgently needed humanitarian aid cross-border to conflict-affected communities.



Villagers hiding in forests, bunkers and caves

Background of Burma Army expansion into Mutraw

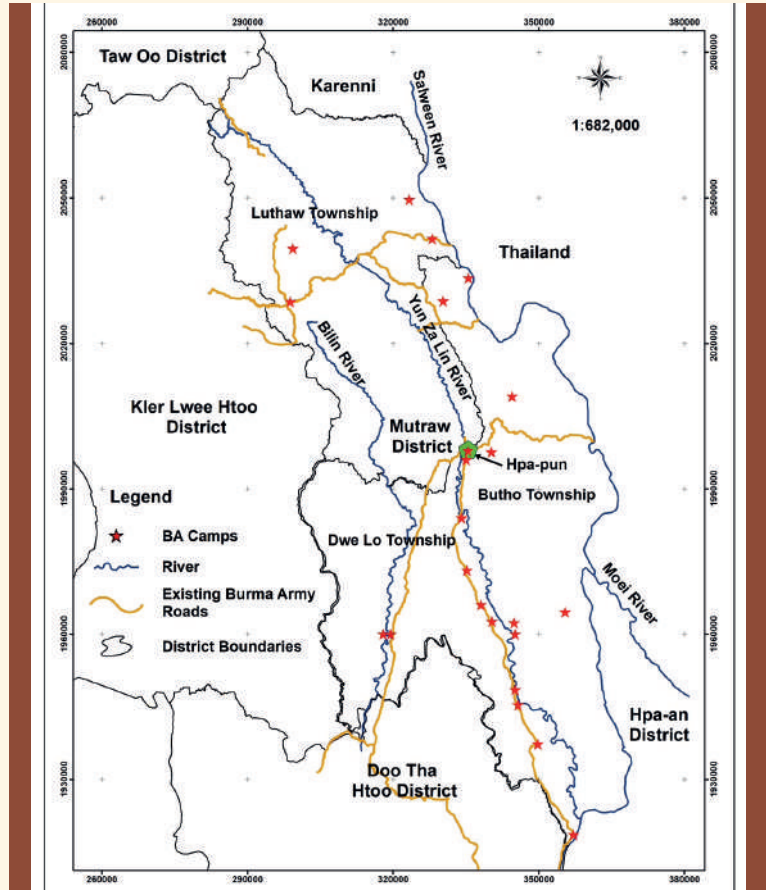
At the start of the Karen revolution in January 1949, the entire district of Mutraw was under the KNU. In 1955, after heavy fighting, the Burma Army managed to seize control of the district capital, Papun, in Mutraw's central valley, but the surrounding mountainous terrain, including the Salween river border with Thailand, remained under the KNU's 5th Brigade.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Burma Army launched large-scale offensives and anti-insurgency operations against the KNU in the surrounding districts of Nyaunglebin, Thaton and Hpa-an, enabling them to close in on Mutraw and set up further camps along the river valleys in the south of the district.

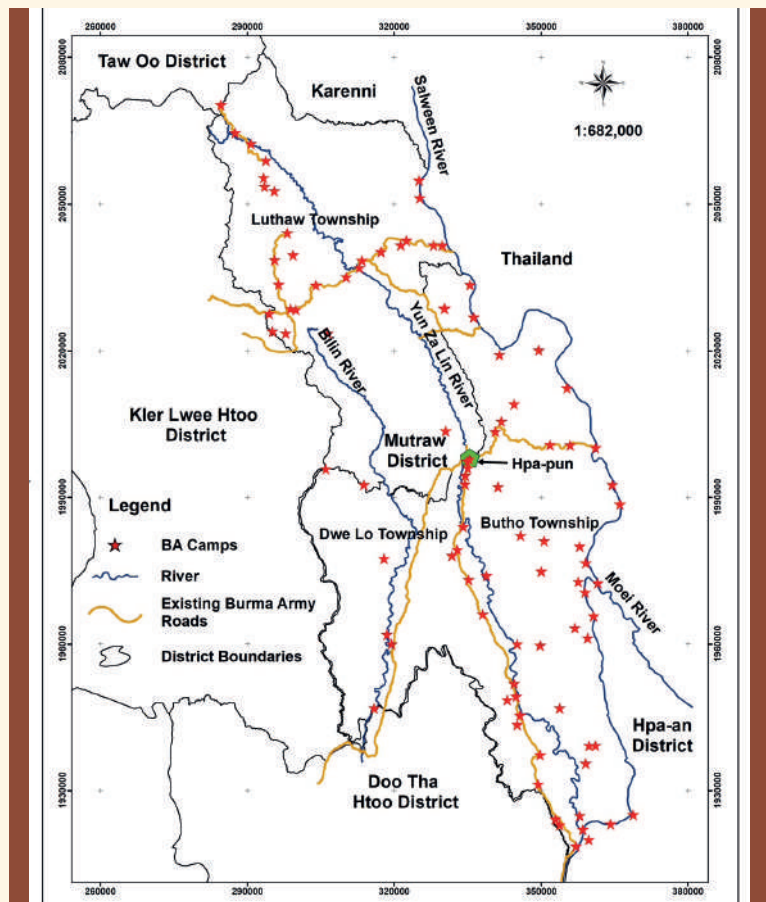
In 1992, the Burma Army carried out a scorched earth campaign in northern and southeast Papun, forcibly relocating 6,000 villagers. In the southeast, the campaign was aimed to seize the strategic vantage point of Sleeping Dog Hill, from which they could fire artillery across the Salween at the KNU headquarters of Manerplaw. After months of fierce fighting, involving air strikes, the hill fell to the Burma Army on April 22, 1992. In the north, the campaign was aimed to clear an access route to the Salween River at Sawhta, and in October 1992, the Burma Army seized Sawhta from the KNU, and established a base on the Salween River. However, in 1994, there were still only 25 Burma army camps in the entire district of Mutraw.

After the fall of Manerplaw in January 1995, the Burma Army intensified its offensives against the KNU, carrying out a mass scorched earth campaign in eastern Mutraw from December 1995 to February 1996, in which over 100 villages were uprooted and forced into guarded relocation sites. In 1997, this campaign was extended to western Mutraw. Tens of thousands of villagers fled to Thailand as refugees. The Burma Army built new camps in the territories it had seized, and by 2004, had established 54 military camps in Mutraw, mainly along the access routes to Papun town and to the Salween River.

In 2006, the Burma Army carried out renewed offensives against the KNU in Toungoo and Nyaunglebin, as well as in northern Mutraw, displacing 10,000 villagers. In that year, the IDP camp of Ei Thu Hta was set up on the bank of the Salween River, east of Papun town, for IDPs fleeing from the offensives in Toungoo and Nyaunglebin, as they were blocked from entering refugee camps in Thailand.



Burma Army camps in Mutraw, 1994

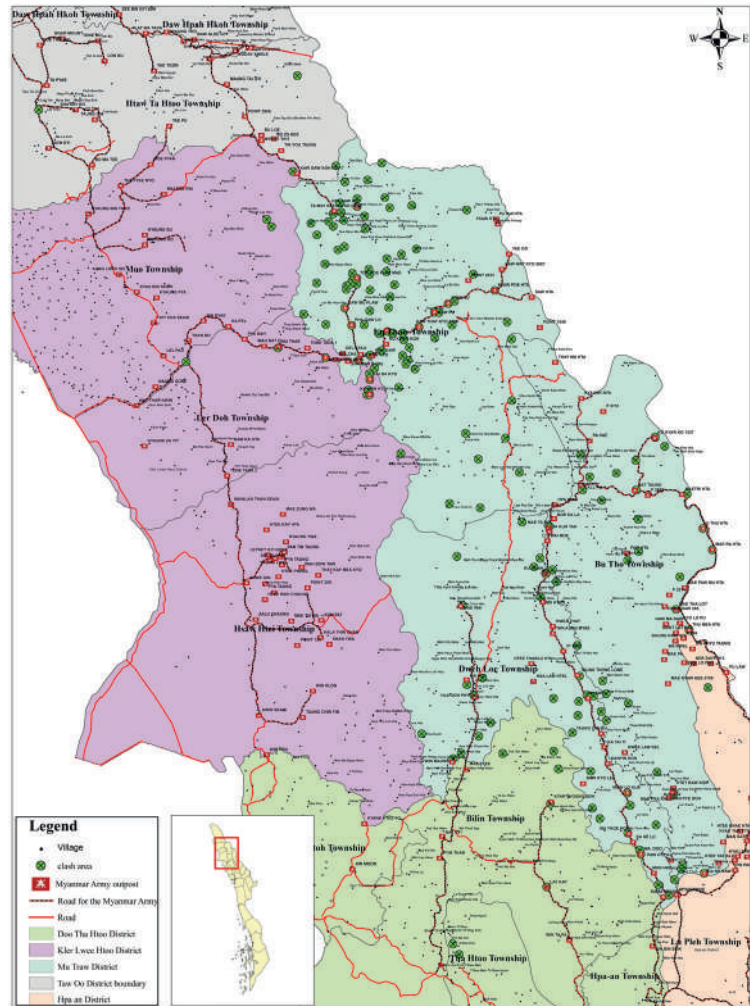


Burma Army camps in Mutraw, early 2021

By the time the KNU signed a ceasefire agreement with the Thein Sein government in January 2012, there were already 65 Burma Army camps in Mutraw. During ceasefire negotiations, the KNU requested that the Burma Army withdraw from 17 of these camps. However, instead of withdrawing, the Burma Army continued expanding and building new camps. By 2017, thirteen new camps had been built, and existing camps reinforced. The Burma Army also repeatedly failed to adhere to the terms of the ceasefire agreement, whereby they had to request permission to go beyond 50 yards on either side of designated routes in Mutraw. This led to frequent armed clashes between the two sides.

In early 2018, the Burma Army began construction of a strategic access road in northern Mutraw, without the agreement of the KNU. This led to intensified clashes, and the displacement of over 2,400 villagers in Mutraw. The Burma Army continued to send in reinforcements to try and build the road, and by mid-2020, the number of Burma Army camps in Mutraw had increased to over 80.

Location of clashes with Burma Army outside designated areas, October 2015 to 2020



Escalated Burma Army shelling to push through access routes into Mutraw

Several months before the February 1 coup, the Burma Army was already carrying out large-scale troop mobilization in northern Karen State to penetrate into Mutraw District, and push through road construction that would enable quick troop deployment and provide year-round supply routes to their camps.

The KNU had long resisted these road construction plans, which breached the NCA agreement, and on December 1, 2020, the Karen National Liberation Army issued a statement demanding that the Burma Army withdraw all its bases from villages in KNU controlled areas, and dismantle all new camps set up since the NCA, by the end of 2020. At that time, the Burma Army had 83 camps in Mutraw.

The Burma Army ignored the KNU's demand, and began launching mortar attacks in Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) along the access road to northern Mutraw, and in Dwelo township of southwest Mutraw, along the main road from Bilin. Shells were deliberately fired into villages and surrounding farmlands. By the end of January 2021, over 5,300 villagers had been newly displaced by these attacks. Most were hiding in the jungle and in desperate need of humanitarian aid.

After the coup, in mid-February, the Burma Army brought in over 1,000 new reinforcements, and stepped up artillery attacks to continue trying to clear access routes in Mutraw. This led to new displacement of over 1,000 villagers in Luthaw, northern Mutraw, and over 500 villagers in Butho, eastern Mutraw. However, the Burma Army was still unable to secure its supply routes. An attempt to secure 700 sacks from the Thai side of the border was exposed by the Thai media on March 20, and subsequently blocked.

First Burma Army airstrikes in Karen State for over 25 years

One of the most notorious Burma Army artillery posts was at Thee Mu Hta, on the Salween river border of northeast Mutraw, where surrounding villagers lived in constant fear of shelling. To pre-empt further assaults, on March 27 -- Burma's Armed Forces Day -- troops of KNLA Brigade 5 attacked and seized Thee Mu Hta camp.

That afternoon, Burma Army helicopters were seen flying over Day Bu Noh village, near the Brigade 5 Headquarters. At 7:30 pm that night, jets began dropping bombs and firing guns into Day Bu Noh, killing three people, and injuring ten – in the first air attack in Karen State for over 25 years, since before the fall of the KNU headquarters at Manerplaw in January 1995.

Airstrikes began again at 1:50 am the next morning, continuing throughout the day in villages around Day Bu Noh and Thee Mu Hta, as well as at Thee Kaw Hta, south along the Salween, near Ei Thu Hta IDP camp. Two people were killed and one injured.

On March 29, airstrikes continued over Day Bu Noh, as well as in Dwelo township to the south, where a jet fired five missiles as the high school at Ler Htoo Poe village, completely destroying the school.

On March 30, there were further airstrikes in Dwelo, and an airstrike on the Tee Pa Doh gold mining area in Kler Lwe Htoo (Nyaunglebin) killed nine and injured five. On March 31, there were more airstrikes on Day Bu Noh, and on April 1, there was an air strike on Kler Per Koh and Mae Kaw Lo villages in the Mae Way area of Dwelo township, killing two and injuring four.

Over the six days, the airstrikes killed sixteen people and injured twenty.



Damage caused by airstrikes and shells to villagers' houses, property, schools and farms

New wave of displacement to Thailand

The airattacks caused terror among the local population, who began fleeing their homes at the first sign of aircraft on March 27. Those living close to the border immediately started crossing the Salween to seek refuge in Thailand. Those deeper inside Mutraw took shelter in surrounding jungle.

By the end of March, over 5,500 villagers from nineteen communities had crossed over to Thailand in several locations, including the over 2,200 IDPs staying at Ei Thu Hta IDP camp.

The Thai military closely monitored the new arrivals, who were restricted from leaving the immediate vicinity of the river. Humanitarian aid agencies were also forbidden from accessing these refugees, who camped out in the open and relied on their own food supplies. The majority of these refugees were forced back across the river within 48 hours by the Thai military, even as the air attacks were continuing. Most of those pushed back did not dare return to their homes, but sheltered in the jungle along the riverbank.

Renewed Burma Army shelling across Mutraw fuels displacement

Together with the air strikes, the Burma Army renewed shelling along all access routes into Mutraw, from Toungoo in the north, Nyaunglebin in the west, and Bilin and Hpa-an in the south. Shells were also fired along access routes to the Salween river east of Papun town.

Barrages of shells were deliberately fired into villages and surrounding farmlands, causing damage to villagers' houses, property and farms. On April 3, a woman was killed by shells fired into Ler Day village, Butho township. On April 7, three shells fired into Nay Ga village in Dwelo township seriously



Villagers fleeing air attacks



IDPs hiding in the forest

injured four villagers, including two women and an 11-year-old girl. On April 8, shells fired in Luthaw township killed a 55-year-old male villager.

Thousands of villagers in Butho and Dwelo townships of Mutraw fled to hide in the jungle to escape the shelling as well as the airstrikes. By mid-April, there were over 7,600 new IDPs in these areas (1,860 from 15 villages in Kaw Poo and Pa Hai tracts of Butho township; and 5,770 from 28 villages in Lay Poe Hta, K'Ter Ti, Htee The Blu Hta and Ma Hta tracts of Dwelo township), all in urgent need of humanitarian aid.



Villagers injured by airstrikes



Extrajudicial killing, arbitrary arrest of villagers, looting of property

On April 11 and 12, three villagers were shot and killed by Burma Army troops of LIB 704 and LIB 405. One of the villagers, Saw Pah Mae Pa, age 37, from Baw Kyo Leh village, Dwelo township, was shot while riding a motorcycle to send money to his in-laws. The troops took all his money and buried him with his motorcycle.

On April 13, at 8 am, Burma Army troops from IB 19, based at Hpapun town, came to Baw Hta village and rounded up all the villagers and, warned them not to let KNLA attack them, or they would be relocated. They searched every house and seized all villagers' phones, returning them to the owners after checking the contents. They arrested a 57-year-old villager, and his teenage daughter, a grade 8 student. The father was released at 3 pm, but his daughter was taken to the army camp and kept for the night, before being released.

On April 14, two separate units of Burma Army troops looted food and property from villagers. Troops of LIB 408 went to Waw Du village and looted from the following villagers: Naw Hsi (7 bags of rice); Saw Ta Bwe (1 bag of rice and 2 cooking pots); Naw Paw Gay (2 bottles of cooking oil and 1 phone costing 250,000 Kyat). About 100 troops of LIB 403 based at Noh Kay Ko went to Per Koh village and looted from the following villagers: Naw Aye Hsi (6 packs rice, 1 bottle cooking oil, 3 chickens, 1 kg onions, 1 battery charger); Naw Ma Hta (8 kg rice); Naw Eh Paw (3 kg rice); Naw La Kyel (2 kg rice); Naw Ma Ni Aye (2 kg rice); Naw Aye Myint (1 chicken).

Shooting at civilian boats on the Salween border

In mid-April, Burma Army troops based along the Salween opposite Thailand began shooting at civilian boats delivering supplies to IDPs upriver. On April 17, at 9 am, troops of LIB 340 based at Dagwin camp shot at a boat being driven by Kyaw Pwa and Ka Chu, from Mae Sam Laep village. On the same day at 1:20 pm, the troops at Dagwin shot at another

boat belonging to Saw Pah Day, damaging the boat's body.

On April 20, at 9:40 am, troops of LIB 341 stationed at Oo Thu Hta camp fired 10 bullets at Saw Gu Lah's Honda boat while travelling on the river.

On April 22, at 1:20 pm, troops at Dagwin camp fired four shots at a Thai boat carrying non-uniformed Thai Border Patrol Police on the river. The boat driver docked at the army camp for one hour before continuing.

Second round of Burma airstrikes

To protect boat passage along the Salween, early on April 27, KNLA troops of Brigade 5 attacked and seized the Burma Army camp of Mae Ra Hta, opposite Mae Sam Laep village. Some Burma Army troops fled from the base during the attack. A woman on the Thai side was hit by a bullet, and 300 residents of Mae Sam Laep were moved away from the border for safety by the Thai authorities.

At the same time, KNLA attacked the Burma Army outpost at Oo Thu Hta, about three miles north along the Salween, causing the Burma Army troops to abandon the post.

Around noon on April 27, the Burma Army began a new round of airstrikes on civilian areas along the border at Dagwin, Bue Ah Der and Ta Law Thaw, north along the river. Most villagers in these areas had already fled to hide in the jungle.

On April 28 and 29, jets and helicopters carried out six airstrikes along the Salween River, dropping bombs and firing machine guns around Dagwin and nearby Mae Kha Hta.

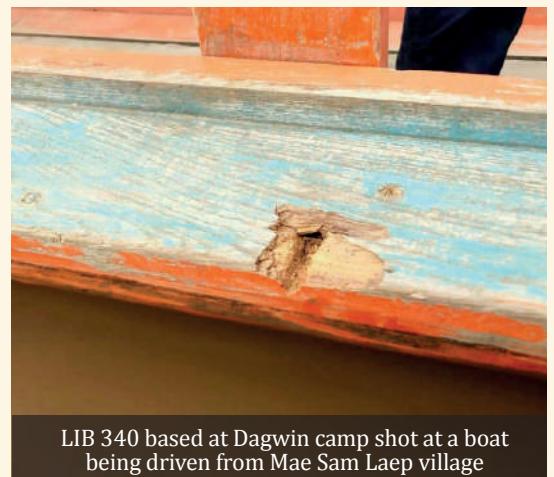
On April 30, there were six airstrikes throughout the day in the area of Dagwin, Mae Ka Hta and Way Bu Hta. The Burma Army also fired shells from Dagwin. On May 1, there was a further airstrike near Dagwin.

On May 2, a fighter jet fired four rockets at Law Taw Koh and Lay Wah Pwa in Dwelo township, and on May 7, four jets dropped eight bombs in Wa Lu, Butho township.

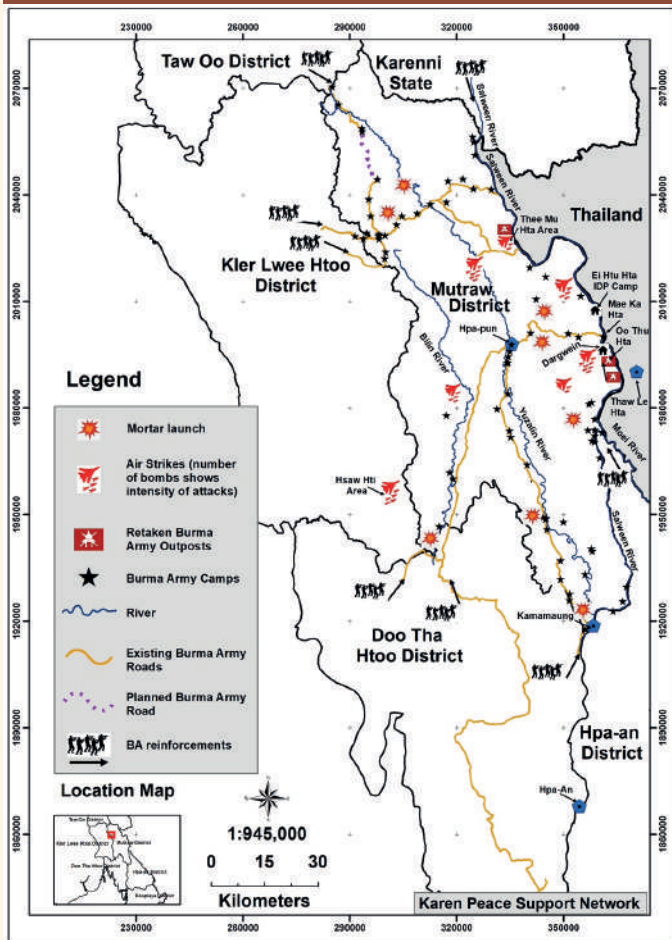
During this second round of airstrikes, no civilian casualties were reported, as most villagers were already in hiding in the jungle.



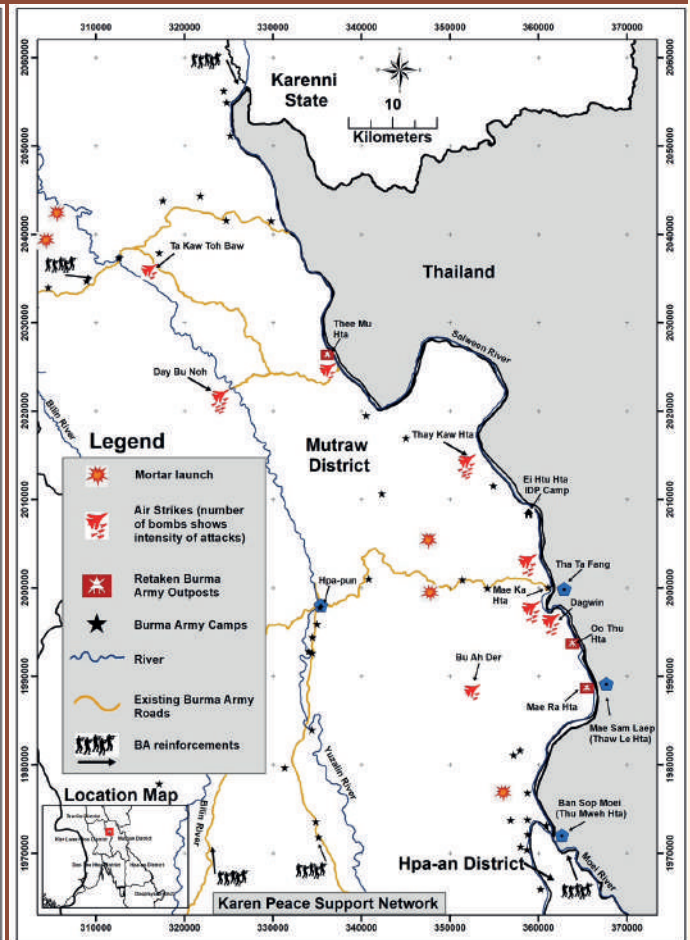
Brigade 5 attacked and seized the Burma Army camp of Mae Ra Hta, opposite Mae Sam Laep village



LIB 340 based at Dagwin camp shot at a boat being driven from Mae Sam Laep village



Burma Army airstrikes and shelling in Mutraw, March – early May, 2021



Detailed border map of Burma Army air attacks and shelling, March – early May, 2021

Second wave of displacement to Thailand

With their recent experience of being pushed back from Thailand, villagers did not immediately cross the Salween when airstrikes began again on April 27, but sheltered in the jungle in makeshift bunkers. However, the intensity of bombing along the river on April 28 caused terrified villagers, mainly women, children and the elderly, to start crossing by boat into Thailand. By 10 pm on April 28, about 300 had crossed over to the Thai side. Within days, this number had swelled to 3,000.

As before, the Thai military restricted humanitarian access to these refugees, who again camped close to the river. On May 8, the refugees were ordered to cross back to Burma, and by May 11, most had returned.

Dire humanitarian crisis

Between March 27 and May 7, 2021, KPSN has recorded a total of 27 air attacks, dropping 47 bombs, and the firing of 575 mortar shells by the Burma Army into civilian areas in Mutraw. By mid-May, this had caused the displacement

of over 70,000 villagers in all three townships of Mutraw, comprising nearly 90% of the district’s rural population of about 80,000.

| Township | No. of IDPs |
|----------|-------------|
| Luthaw | 33,514 |
| Butho | 30,116 |
| Dwelo | 7,108 |
| TOTAL | 70,738 |

These IDPs, scattered in jungle hideouts, are in urgent need of humanitarian aid, particularly food, water and sanitation, shelter and medicines. The most vulnerable are pregnant and lactating women, children, people injured from the fighting, and the elderly. The onset of the rains has exacerbated their hardship.

Ongoing Burma Army attacks and abuses are preventing these IDPs from returning to their homes and cultivating their fields. If they are unable to plant rice at the start of the rainy season, the food crisis will become more dire.

Over 7,000 of the IDPs are sheltering along the western bank of the Salween river, hoping for easier access to aid and potential refuge in Thailand.

Conclusion and recommendations

On April 28, 2021, the day after the Burma Army launched airstrikes in Karen State, the state-run New Light of Myanmar blamed the KNU's Brigade 5 for instigating the violence, accusing them of disobeying the KNU Central Command, breaking NCA agreements and disturbing "regional development."¹

As this briefing paper shows, these accusations are baseless, and yet another crude attempt at divide and rule. It is the Burma Army which has repeatedly violated the ceasefire agreements by their ongoing expansion into KNU territories. The Karen resistance are not the aggressors, but the rightful defenders of our lands and communities from external attack.

The regime's escalated offensives have already displaced almost the entire rural population of Mutraw, with devastating humanitarian consequences. With ongoing Burma Army troop deployment into northern Karen State, KPSN is gravely concerned that the conflict will intensify, and the already dire humanitarian crisis will worsen.

KPSN therefore makes the following urgent recommendations:

To the Thai government:

- To give protection and shelter to refugees fleeing Burma Army attacks and persecution
- To allow humanitarian aid agencies to access and assist these refugees
- To allow humanitarian aid to be delivered cross-border to conflict-affected ethnic communities

To international donors

- To provide adequate humanitarian aid to existing and newly arrived refugees in Thailand
- To provide humanitarian and development aid cross-border to conflict-affected communities in Burma, through ethnic social service departments and CSOs/CBOs
- To immediately suspend all development aid to the military regime, and review all humanitarian aid programs to ensure they do not legitimize or subsidize the military.
- To end all support for the failed NCA peace process, and terminate the Joint Peace Fund

To foreign governments

- Not to give diplomatic recognition to the illegitimate coup regime
- Not to sell arms to the regime, and to end any defence cooperation
- To impose economic sanctions on the military regime, including targeted sanctions on military businesses, and suspend all investments, especially in large-scale infrastructure and resource extraction projects, until there is lasting peace, and power is devolved under a new federal constitution, giving local communities the right to decide on their own development.



Villagers from nineteen communities crossed over to Thailand in several locations

¹ <https://www.gnlm.com.mm/brigade-5-of-knu-attacks-camps-of-tatmadaw-with-lesser-strengths-by-breaking-nca-agreements/>

