



IDPs from Lay Kay Kaw, Pa Hi Klaw, Ingying Myaing, Htee Mae Wah Khee, Ya Thay Gu, Myitta Lin Myaing, Min Latt Pan fleeing heavy shelling and fighting to Thai side of border, Dec 19, 2021

# SAC REGIME UNLEASHES WAR ACROSS THE SOUTHERN DAWNA RANGE

## Summary

Since late 2021, fierce fighting has raged between the SAC regime and Karen resistance forces in Dooplaya District (KNU's 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade) on both sides of the Dawna Range, south of the Asia Highway, Burma's main trade route to Thailand. Heavy shelling and airstrikes by SAC forces have killed or injured 71 civilians and displaced over 86,000, many of whom are sheltering in makeshift IDP camps along the Thai border.

This briefing paper describes the unfolding of conflict, instigated by the regime's incursions into KNU ceasefire territories, and fueled by mobilization of thousands of SAC troops, including from bases across Dooplaya which were never withdrawn despite the KNU's 2012 ceasefire.

A key flashpoint has been the Lay Kay Kaw "Peace Town", south of Myawaddy, funded by Japan for returning refugees. This flagship peace project now lies deserted and bomb-scarred, its over 3,000 residents once again fleeing for their lives. This must serve as a lesson for Japan, not only against premature funding of refugee return, but also provision of billions of dollars in development aid to the Naypyidaw government without benchmarks of progress towards genuine peace. Japanese ODA has not only subsidized Naypyidaw's war machine, but also funded strategic infrastructure projects such as the East West Economic Corridor (EWEC) which have facilitated quick deployment of the regime's troops into conflict areas.

As the SAC's atrocities mount across the country, KPSN calls for stronger economic and diplomatic pressure on the regime, and urges Japan to suspend all ongoing ODA projects, including bridge building along the EWEC. KPSN also urges foreign donors to provide increased cross-border humanitarian aid to IDPs.



KPSN

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.

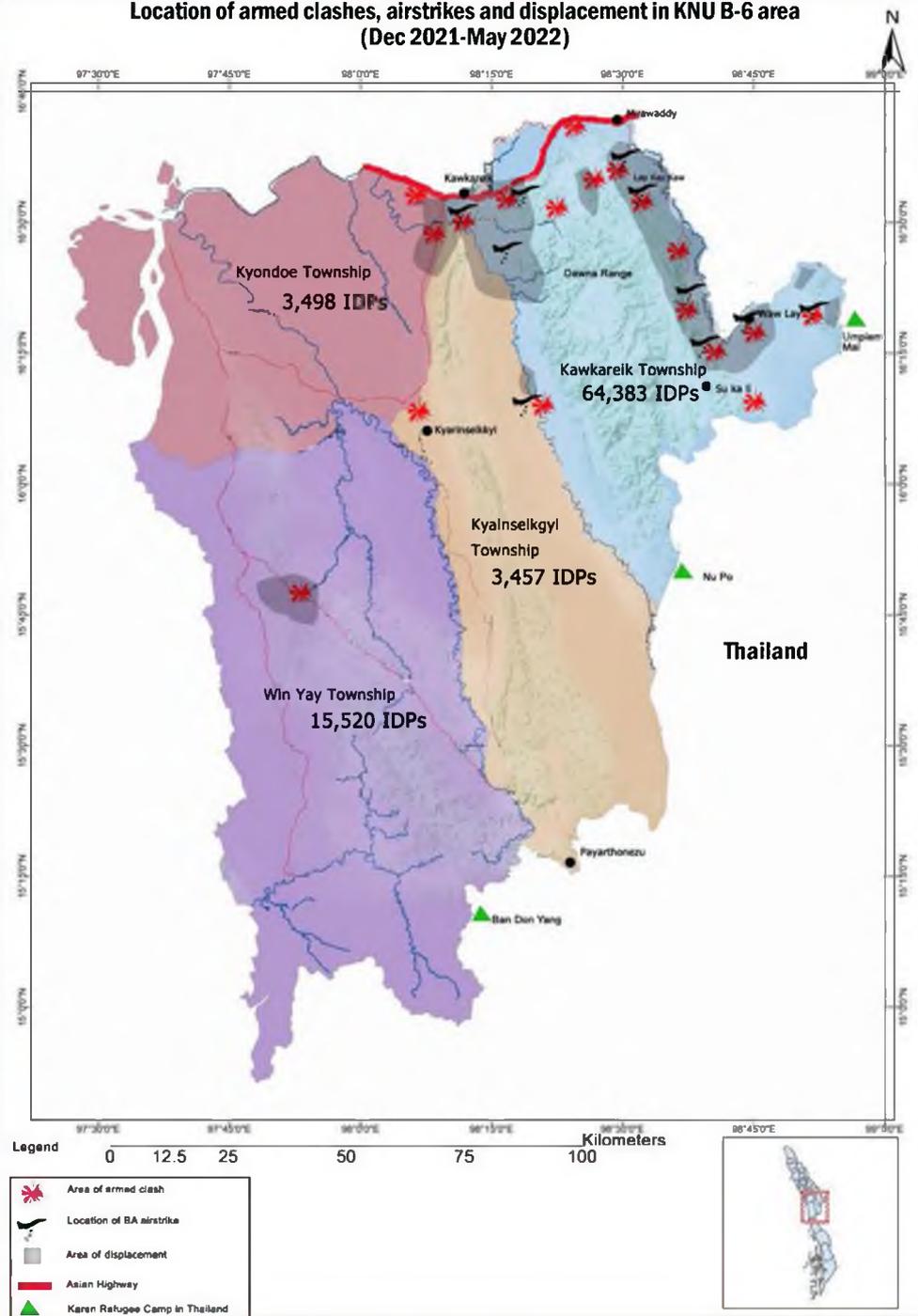
July 2022

## Post-coup eruption of conflict in Dooplaya

For nearly ten years after the KNU's 2012 bilateral ceasefire, there was little armed conflict in Dooplaya. However, as the regime began cracking down on anti-coup protesters in the months following the coup on February 1, 2021, tensions began to rise between the regime's forces and the KNU in the KNU's 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade, where anti-regime activists were sheltering. SAC troops set up new checkpoints along roads and carried out random searches in villages. In September, the SAC sent armed patrols into KNU territories south of Kawkareik, in violation of ceasefire protocols. On September 30, KNU troops resisted, and the ensuing fighting spread into six villages, causing thousands to flee their homes.

At the same time, KNU troops sought to block the SAC from sending reinforcements along the road from Thanbyuzayat to 3 Pagodas Pass, and on October 11, the SAC attacked and seized the KNU's Lu Shah checkpoint, 20 kilometers southeast of Thanbyuzayat. The fighting displaced four villages in the area.

Location of armed clashes, airstrikes and displacement in KNU B-6 area (Dec 2021-May 2022)



Villagers injured by SAC shelling in Myut Haung, Jan 8, 2022



Villager injured by SAC airstrike in Thay Baw Boe, July 1, 2022

## Fighting erupts in Lay Kay Kaw “Peace Town”, spreads southwards along Thai border

The “Peace Town” of Lay Kay Kaw south of Myawaddy, funded by Japan for returning refugees after the KNU ceasefire, was one of the areas suspected of harbouring anti-regime activists. At the end of September 2021, SAC troops from LIB 560, under Tanintharyi-based Military Operations Command (MOC) 13, deployed to Dooplaya before the November 2020 election, started carrying out house-to-house searches in Lay Kay Kaw, but did not initially make any arrests.

However, on December 13, 2021, Brigadier General Myint Htun Naing, the MOC 13 commander, arrived at the SAC artillery base just south of Lay Kay Kaw and on December 14 led over 150 troops into Lay Kay Kaw, forcibly entering houses and arresting suspected activists. On December 15, the troops returned at 10 am, beating and carrying out further arrests. In total 22 men were arrested, tied up and taken to Myawaddy for interrogation, including two former NLD MPs. The fate of those arrested remains unknown.

Local KNU officials immediately protested the arrests, but SAC troops ignored this, and continued searching through Lay Kay Kaw, causing the KNLA to open fire. Heavy fighting ensued, with SAC shelling indiscriminately into Lay Kay Kaw from nearby “Artillery Hill”, causing the town residents to flee in terror.

Over the next few weeks, fighting between SAC and Karen resistance forces spread east and south along the Thai border, displacing thousands more villagers. On December 23, SAC started launching airstrikes over Lay Kay Kaw to try to dislodge the KNLA.

During early 2022, fighting continued to spread southwards. On March 21, KNLA temporarily seized the SAC base at Maw Khee, 50 kilometers south of Lay Kay Kaw, and carried out successful ambushes of SAC troop reinforcements from Myawaddy, prompting further retaliatory airstrikes.

On May 18, 2022, KNLA forces managed to seize the SAC base at Thay Baw Boe on the Thai border, 30 kilometers south of Lay Kay Kaw, despite multiple airstrikes by SAC fighter jets and helicopters.

### Fighting spreads west of the Dawna Hills

On December 16, the day after fighting broke out at Lay Kay Kaw, SAC troops began advancing into KNU territories south of the Asia Highway near Kawkareik town, ignoring warnings by the KNU. When SAC troops advanced beyond 100 meters into the KNU area, the KNLA opened fire and fighting began, with SAC shelling indiscriminately into surrounding villages.

The SAC has refused to retreat since that time, and has progressively pushed southwards, invading dozens of villages, causing thousands of local inhabitants to flee their homes. Where KNLA has resisted, SAC has shelled indiscriminately and employed airstrikes.

The SAC troops have looted and destroyed villagers’ possessions, burned down houses, and forced villagers to be porters and human shields. On March 20, they seized the KNU’s Dawna Hospital, about 10 kilometers south of Kawkareik town, and looted the contents before retreating. Local health workers still dare not return.



House-to-house searches by SAC in Lay Kay Kaw before fighting erupted



IDP site on riverbank at Thay Baw Boe village, south of Myawaddy, Dooplaya District, January 2022

## Multiple airstrikes

Multiple SAC airstrikes on both sides of the Dawna Hills, including close to the Thai border, have caused widespread damage of houses, schools and religious buildings. The airstrikes were carried out by fighter jets from the Hmawbi air base north of Yangon, and by attack helicopters from air bases in Maylawmyine and Hpa-an.

SAC airstrikes in Dooplaya District, Dec 2021-May 2022						
No.	Date	Location of Strike	Time	Type of Aircraft	No. of aircraft	No. of airstrikes
1	23-Dec-21	Lay Kay Kaw	10:30 pm	fighter jet	2	1
2	24-Dec-21	Lay Kay Kaw	3 pm	fighter Jet	2	1
3	25-Dec-21	Htee Mae Wah Khee	1 pm	attack helicopter	2	1
4	26-Dec-22	KNU-Livestock area on Asia Highway nr. Kawkareik	12 am	attack helicopter	1	1
5	10-Jan-22	Ywar Thit (Kaw Ka Reik)	10:45 am	attack helicopter	2	1
6	14-Jan-22	Palu Lay	2 pm	attack helicopter	2	1
7	14-Jan-22	Ywar Thit ( Kaw Ka Reik)		attack helicopter	1	1
8	16-Feb-22	Palu Lay	11 am	attack helicopter	2	1
9	9-Mar-22	Lay Kay Kaw	10 am	attack helicopter	3	1
10	25-Mar-22	Htee Ka Palae	10 am	fighter jet	1	4
11	26-Mar-22	Htee Ka Palae	2 am	fighter jet	1	1
12	27-Mar-22	Lay Kay Kaw, Bler Doh	2 pm	attack helicopter	2	1
13	3-Apr-22	Kyeik	3 pm	attack helicopter fighter jet	2 1	1
14	4-Apr-22	Kyeik	9 pm	attack helicopter	2	1
15	10-Apr-22	Lay Kay Kaw	11 am to 2 pm	fighter jet	2	16
16	11-Apr-22	Lay Kay Kaw	1 am	fighter jet	2	1
17	12-Apr-22	Noh Poe, Htee Mu Hta	11 pm	attack helicopter	1	1
18	19-Apr-22	Lay Kay Kaw	12 pm	fighter jet	1	1
19	21-Apr-22	Htee Tha Blu Khee	5 pm	fighter jet	1	1
20	21-Apr-22	Kwee Ler Ter	5 pm	fighter jet	2	1
21	18-May-22	Thay Baw Boe	12:20 pm	fighter jet attack helicopter	4 2	38
22	27-Jun-22	U Kri Hta	4 pm	fighter jet	4	8
23	28-Jun-22	U Kri Hta		fighter jet	5	15
24	29-Jun-22	U Kri Hta		fighter jet	8	49
25	30-Jun-22	Thay Baw Boe (entered Thai airspace to attack)	12 pm	fighter jet	8	22
26	1-Jul-22	Thay Baw Boe & U Kri Hta	7 pm	Fighter jet	3	31
27	2-Jul-22	Lay Gaw	1.30 pm	fighter jet	1	1
28	5-Jul-22	Lay Kaw Kaw & Bleh Doh	night	Fighter jet	1	1

## Civilian casualties from indiscriminate SAC shelling and airstrikes

SAC troops have repeatedly fired shells indiscriminately into civilian areas, both west and east of the Dawna Range. Between December and May 2022, altogether 8 villagers have been killed and 63 injured by SAC shelling or airstrikes in Dooplaya District, including women and children.

## Civilian casualties from SAC shelling and airstrikes, Dec 2021-May 2022

Date	Location	Type of attack	Civilian casualties	
			Killed	Injured
23 Dec 2021	Thay Baw Boe	Shelling		2
24 Dec 2021	Lay Kay Kaw	Shelling		3
25 Dec 2021	Lay Kay Kaw	Shelling		3
27 Dec 2021	Lay Kay Kaw	Shelling		1
30 Dec 2021	Lay Kay Kaw	Shelling		4
31 Dec 2021	Lay Kay Kaw	Shelling		1
1 Jan 2022	Lay Kay Kaw	Shelling		1
3 Jan 2022	Palu Gyi	Shelling	1	
8 Jan 2022	Myut Haung	Shelling		7
10 Jan 2022	Ywa Thit	Shelling, Airstrikes	1	12
5 Feb 2022	Ywar Kalay (Noh Poe)	Shelling		3
16 Feb 2022	Lay Kay Kaw area (Palu Lay)	Airstrike		1
18 Feb 2022	Maung Ma Ywar Thit (Ta Maing Kon)	Shelling	1	1
23 Mar 2022	Taung Kya Ain	Shelling		4
24 Mar 2022	Htee Moo Hta	Shelling	1	4
3-4 Apr 2022	Kyeik	Airstrikes		2
12 Apr 2022	Htee Moo Hta	Shelling		4
23 Apr 2022	T'Koo Heh	Shelling	2	1
1 Jul 2022	Thay Baw Boe	Airstrike	2	5
2 Jul 2022	Lay Gaw	Airstrike		4
<b>Total civilian casualties</b>			<b>8 killed</b>	<b>63 injured</b>

## Ongoing SAC troop reinforcement

During the fighting, SAC has mobilized thousands of troops – not only the fifteen infantry battalions and two artillery battalions already based in Dooplaya, but also over a dozen battalions from Tanintharyi-based Military Operations Command 13, Pa-an-based ID 22 and Thaton-based ID 44 – as well as BGF troops from local bases, and from Thaton and Mutraw.

On March 7, Saw Liston, the KNU District Secretary of Dooplaya, wrote a formal request to the SAC Southeast Regional Commander in Mawlamyine to withdraw troops within three days from KNU-controlled areas back to their bases. However, there was no response, and instead, the SAC brought in more reinforcements.

## Large-scale displacement

### Total numbers of IDPs in Dooplaya District (June 2022)

No	Township	Village Tract	Village	Household	Gender		Total
					Male	Female	
1	Kawkareik ( West Dawna Range)	11	48	5,559	14,471	14,697	29,168
2	Kawkareik ( East Dawna Range)	4	42	6,853	18,269	17,244	35,215
3	Kyainseikgyi	2	12	685	1,733	1,724	3,457
4	Win Yay	3	11	3,097	7,712	7,808	15,520
5	Kyon Doe	1	3	775	1,724	1,774	3,498
<b>Total</b>		<b>21</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>16,969</b>	<b>43,611</b>	<b>43,247</b>	<b>86,858</b>



IDPs from U Kray Hta village fleeing fighting, Waw Lay area, south of Myawaddy, Dooplaya District, June 26, 2022



IDPs in Kawkareik Township fleeing heavy artillery shelling by Burma Army on Jan 8, 2022

There have been two patterns of displacement in Dooplaya. East of the Dawna Range, displaced villagers have fled to the Thai border, where some have crossed into Thailand, but most have gathered in makeshift IDP camps just inside Karen State. West of the Dawna Range, IDPs have mostly fled to shelter in surrounding villages, and have not set up camps.

### ***East of the Dawna Hills: displacement to the Thai border***

As soon as fighting broke out in Lay Kay Kaw on December 15, thousands of residents of Lay Kay Kaw and surrounding villages started fleeing to the Thai border. By the end of December over 15,000 people from 12 villages had fled their homes, of whom about 7,000 crossed over the Moei river to seek shelter in Thailand.

The Thai authorities did not initially block the refugees from crossing, but they were restricted to areas close to the border. Aid agencies were prevented from directly accessing the refugees, who were mostly camped along the river bank, and aid deliveries had to be given through the Thai authorities. Over 3,000 refugees ended up sheltering in a large cattle barn on the east of the Moei River, about 15 kilometers south of Mae Sot, but conditions were crowded, with insufficient washing and toilet facilities.

When there was a lull in fighting at the end of December, some of the refugees crossed back to check on their homes, but were then forbidden by the Thai authorities from returning to Thailand. Those remaining on the Thai side were informed that they should move back to Burma as fighting could no longer be heard. The makeshift camps on the Thai side were gradually dismantled, and by mid-February the refugees had all returned.

As fighting continued spreading southward in March and April, more communities became displaced, setting up new IDP camps along the Thai border. By the end of June there were over 12,000 IDPs sheltering in eight main locations at the border.

### ***West of the Dawna Hills: displacement to surrounding villages***

To the west of the Dawna Hills, the main area of displacement is south of Kawkareik town, where over 29,000 residents of 48 villages have fled their homes. Most have sought shelter in other villages outside the direct conflict area, where they are staying with fellow community members and have not set up separate camps.

## **Urgent need for humanitarian aid**

With SAC troops continuing operations around their villages, the IDPs in all areas still dare not return home. West of the Dawna Range, many IDPs are paddy rice farmers, who worry they will be unable to plant their crops this year.

East of the Dawna Hills, the majority of IDPs are cash crop farmers, growing corn, sugarcane and soybean, whose harvests have been disrupted by the conflict. Many were already in a debt trap, borrowing money as well as seeds from Thai companies to plant crops, and have now fallen even further into debt. These farmers, as well as those employed as farm wage laborers, are now unable to earn a living and are thus in urgent need of food support.

With no thick forest remaining in areas along the Thai border, it has been difficult for IDPs to find safe shelter and hiding places. It has also been difficult to find wood and bamboo to construct temporary shelters in makeshift camps.

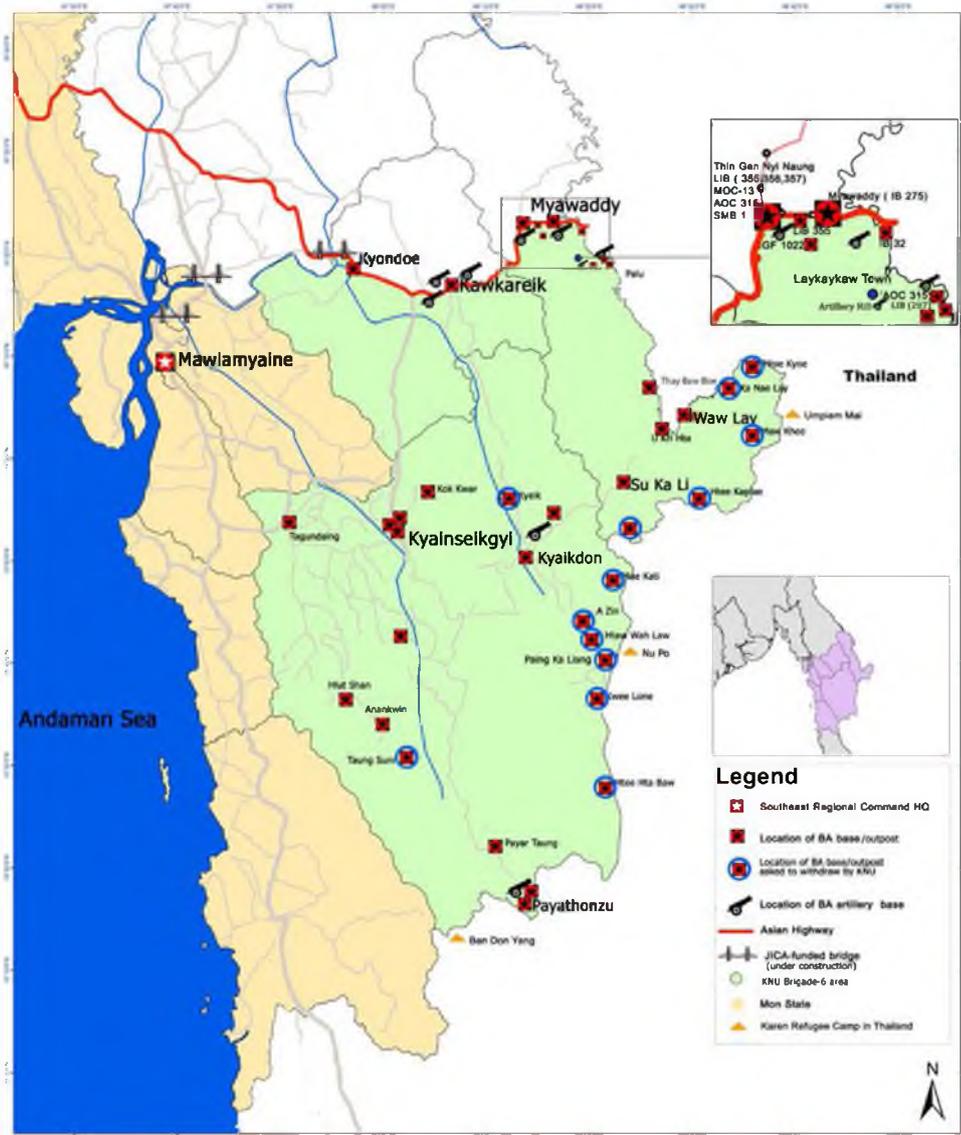
Local community groups and KNU administrative officials have set up emergency response teams, which have been providing cross-border aid in all areas.

## Background of Burma Army militarization despite “peace process” in Dooplaya

Ongoing Burma Army militarization in Dooplaya after the 2012 ceasefire with the KNU show that the Naypyidaw generals never intended to relinquish control of this lucrative border trade area, which had been a main source of revenue for the KNU before its trade posts at Palu and Waw Lay were overrun more than 30 years ago.

After the ceasefire, the KNU requested that the Burma Army withdraw thirteen bases in Dooplaya District, mainly along the Thai border, south of Myawaddy and north of Three Pagodas Pass. Not only were these bases not withdrawn, but they were reinforced with cement fortifications and bunkers.

These bases were in areas which had been depopulated during Burma Army offensives before 2012, and whose residents remain in Umphiem and Nu Pho refugee camps. The ongoing existence of these bases has been a major factor discouraging these refugees from returning.



KERT/KCBOs responding to emergency needs of IDPs fleeing airstrikes, heavy shelling by Burma Army in U Kray Hta and Ler Khaw, Dooplaya District

## Lessons from Lay Kay Kaw, the “Peace Town” turned battlefield

The transformation of Lay Kay Kaw from a flagship peace project into a bomb-scarred battlefield provide clear lessons for Japan and other foreign donors.

### *Refugee return must not be promoted before stable peace*

The construction of Lay Kay Kaw was funded by Japan through the Nippon Foundation as part of its “rehabilitation program for conflict-affected communities” in southeast Burma, costing over 57 million US dollars. Between 2015 and 2021, over 800 houses had been built in Lay Kay Kaw, with over 3,000 residents, who were mostly former refugees and IDPs.

With these refugees once again suffering the trauma of displacement, it was obviously gravely irresponsible to support their return without ensuring their security – only possible through progress in political negotiations, which had never even begun.

Far from having security guarantees, Lay Kaw Kaw was always highly vulnerable to attack, being built between existing Burma Army bases, including “Artillery Hill” a strategic vantage point two kilometers south of the town. As soon as fighting broke out on December 15, 2021, shells were fired from this hill directly into the town.

The Nippon Foundation bears blame not only for funding the construction of Lay Kay Kaw in such an insecure location, but also for further playing into the fake “post-conflict” narrative by allocating 539,700 US dollars to promote Lay Kay Kaw as a tourist destination (a project planned to start, ironically, in February 2021).

### *Premature resumption of large-scale ODA has strengthened the Burma Army*

A further lesson for foreign donors is that they were overhasty in resuming large-scale aid to the Naypyidaw government without linking this to benchmarks of political reform and progress in the peace process.

Since 2012, Japan has granted massive amounts of ODA to Burma’s central government, far dwarfing its peace support funding in ethnic areas. By 2017, Japan had provided over 1 trillion yen (USD 9.3 billion) in loan assistance, over 320 billion yen (USD 2.9 billion) in grant aid and 98 billion yen (USD 912 million) in technical assistance to the Burmese government.<sup>1</sup>

This aid prioritized infrastructure and industrial development, promoting Japan’s economic interests, and benefitting its own companies. Its main aid/investment project has been the Thilawa Special Economic Zone -- a joint venture between the Burmese government, Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and Mitsubishi, Marubeni and Sumitomo Corporations.

The billions of dollars provided by Japan not only subsidized and legitimized the military-backed government (and its security apparatus), but also served to entrench its unitary, centralized governance system – placing Japan firmly on Naypyidaw’s side of



Source: JICA's preparatory survey for EWEC Highway Development Project, Feb 2020

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/27/japan-suspend-aid-benefitting-myanmar-junta>

the conflict, against the ethnic groups demanding federalism, and making a mockery of Japan's claims to be supporting national reconciliation in Burma.

Japanese-funded infrastructure projects have also directly served the Burma Army's strategic interests, for example the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) Improvement Project, linking Myawaddy on the Thai border with cities in central Burma. In 2015, KPSN issued a statement exposing how construction of the Asia Highway (part of the EWEC) had fuelled conflict, and urged that such large-scale projects should wait until a full peace agreement was reached. However, in 2015, the ADB, with JICA funding, loaned USD 100 million to Myanmar's Ministry of Construction to build the 67 km length of highway in eastern Karen State between Kawkaiek to Eindu. The project is not yet completed.

In 2015, JICA also approved a 33.869 billion yen (approx. USD 260 million) loan for the rebuilding of three bridges along the EWEC road link between Mawlamyine and Kawkaiek. Japanese companies were contracted to build these bridges, and have continued work even after the coup. SAC's state-run media reported in early 2022 that the Gyaing Kawkaiek bridge, being built by Hazama Ando Corp. and P.S. Mitsubishi Construction Co., was 70% completed, while the Gyaing Zathabyin bride and the Attaran bridge, being built by Japan's IHI Corp, are still in the early stages of construction.

Thus, despite Japan's suspension of new ODA projects in Burma since the coup, its existing ODA aid is still serving the regime's strategic interests.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The SAC's deliberate instigation of conflict in Dooplaya, where the KNU ceasefire was still relatively intact, makes clear its insincerity towards the peace process, and its intention to use force to crush all resistance to its rule.

With atrocities mounting across the country, KPSN reiterates our calls for increased international pressure on the SAC regime, including:

1. Imposition of a global arms embargo and sanctions on the supply of aviation fuel.
2. Targeted economic sanctions, including on gas revenue.
3. Referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court, to hold the Burma Army accountable for their crimes
4. Suspension not only of new development aid to the regime, but also ongoing development projects – including JICA's funding of bridge construction along the EWEC.
5. Increased provision of cross-border humanitarian aid to IDPs through ethnic social service departments and CSOs/CBOs.

KPSN also urges Thailand to give protection and shelter to refugees fleeing Burma Army attacks and persecution, and to allow humanitarian agencies to access and assist these refugees.



IDPs at Plaw Ter Pyo IDP site, Pa Lu Poe, south of Myawaddy, Dooplaya District.