



*Internally displaced villagers in hiding*

## **KAREN HEARTLANDS UNDER ATTACK**

### **Amidst Covid-19 crisis**

### **KPSN calls urgently for a stop to the Burma Army's new offensive in Mutraw**

Since the start of 2020, the Burma Army has deployed over 2,000 troops, and fired hundreds of mortar shells to try and push through a strategic road into the northern Karen district of Mutraw, despite its existing ceasefire with the Karen National Union. Hundreds of villagers have fled to hide in the jungle, and thousands more are preparing to flee. Villagers have been tortured, shot at indiscriminately and killed.

Burma Army claims that the road is being built for “development” are patently false. If completed, the road will provide a vital motorized transport route into northern Mutraw, enabling year-round deployment of troops, ammunitions and supplies from the Southern Regional Command at Toungoo.

The Burma Army is clearly intent on expanding control of Mutraw, which is under the KNU's 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade and is a key Karen stronghold, located strategically between the KNU's 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Brigades, in Thaton, Toungoo, Nyaunglebin, and Pa-an, respectively.

The forested mountain terrain of Mutraw is also the KNU area where the Burmese government has the least control. Most of its 80,000 population are subsistence farmers, who live in close harmony with their natural environment, managing their lands according to centuries-old customary laws. The KNU's Mutraw administration runs autonomous education, health and judicial systems, and in December 2018, local Karen communities set up their own protected park area -- the 5,485 square-kilometer Salween Peace Park, an initiative hailed globally for its indigenous stewardship.

Protected forests in the peace park are now being felled and set alight by Burma Army troops seeking to secure the road building area.



### **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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Local Mutraw communities know very well the real intent of the Burma Army's new roads, and have held public demonstrations against them. On January 15, about 1,000 villagers gathered near the road building area to protest the planned construction.

Since the 2012 ceasefire, the Burma Army has continuously expanded its presence in Mutraw, building 16 new camps, despite KNU objections. There are currently 81 Burma Army camps scattered across Mutraw, mainly along rivers and dirt paths, but many of these are sparsely manned, as the KNU only permits the Burma Army to supply these camps by horse or on foot, straying no farther than 50 meters from either side of paths.

KPSN's earlier report "The Nightmare Returns" documented the Burma Army's March 2018 offensive in Mutraw, when 1,500 troops from eight battalions were deployed to try and build the same road they are seeking to push

through today. At that time 2,400 villagers were displaced, mainly around the planned road-building area, and local community leader Saw O Moo was shot and killed.

The renewed offensive this year, deploying at least thirteen battalions and full artillery power in northern Mutraw, while reinforcing troops and launching attacks in southern Mutraw, shows that the Burma Army is determined to penetrate into Mutraw at all costs, in flagrant contempt of existing ceasefire agreements. Meanwhile, military authorities are preventing the KNU from holding public consultations about the peace process.

Particularly during this time, when Burma should be using all available resources to prevent the spread of the deadly Covid-19 virus, it is senseless to be spending huge amounts of money on an offensive that is sabotaging the peace process – and causing fresh displacement that will increase vulnerability to disease.

### **KPSN therefore makes the following urgent demands:**

#### **To the Burmese government and the Burma Army:**

- To immediately stop all road construction in Mutraw
- To stop all offensive military operations, including drone surveillance, and pull back troops from Karen areas
- To allow the KNU to hold public consultations about the peace process without restriction

#### **To the international community**

- To call publicly for the Burma Army to stop its military offensive in Mutraw
- To stop business as usual with Burma, and exert diplomatic and economic pressure for an end to Burma Army offensives throughout the country, so that inclusive dialogue towards a new federal constitution can begin
- To stop investing in and funding development, infrastructure and resource extraction projects in Karen areas through the Burmese government. Such projects should only be considered when there is lasting peace, and power is devolved under a new federal constitution, giving local communities the right to decide on their own development
- To provide humanitarian aid cross-border to displaced communities in eastern Burma
- To resume adequate levels of humanitarian aid to refugees in camps on the Thai-Burma border

## **Timeline of human rights abuses, attacks and other ceasefire violations by the Burma Army in Mutraw (Jan-April 2020)**

### **Jan 2, 2020: Two elderly villagers shot and injured by Burma Army IB 408**

On January 2, troops of Burma Army IB 408 (under Military Operations Command 8), led by second battalion commander Naung Tun, approached Wa Tho Hkoh village, Lay Hpoe Hta village tract, Dwelo township, Mutraw District, where the KNU 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade's 102 Battalion had a post. Fighting broke out, after which the KNU troops escaped the village. The BA troops then posted themselves in the centre of the village. That afternoon, there was a funeral in the village, and two villagers, Saw Sein Than, aged 60, and Saw Zaw Ti Ka, aged 63, came out to arrange the burial. The BA troops shot at them, hitting them in the neck, chest and ribs. The BA then called to the Ka Ma Maung administrator, and sent the villagers to Hpa-an General Hospital. The BA reported falsely that the villagers had been shot during fighting, denying their own responsibility for firing without justification on civilians.



**Villager shot by Burma Army**

### **Jan 2, 2020: Villager arrested and tortured by Burma Army LIB 408**

After the fighting in Wa Tho Hkoh village on January 2, BA troops arrested Saw Y--, a local villager, and detained him for three hours. During this time he was severely beaten and held at gunpoint. Since he was threatened severely not to talk or look at the soldiers, he could not shout for help or see the perpetrators' faces. The victim sustained injuries to his face, neck and chest, but could not afford to go to the hospital for treatment.

**Jan 2020 to the present: Constant BA shelling displaces two villages, threatens eleven villages**

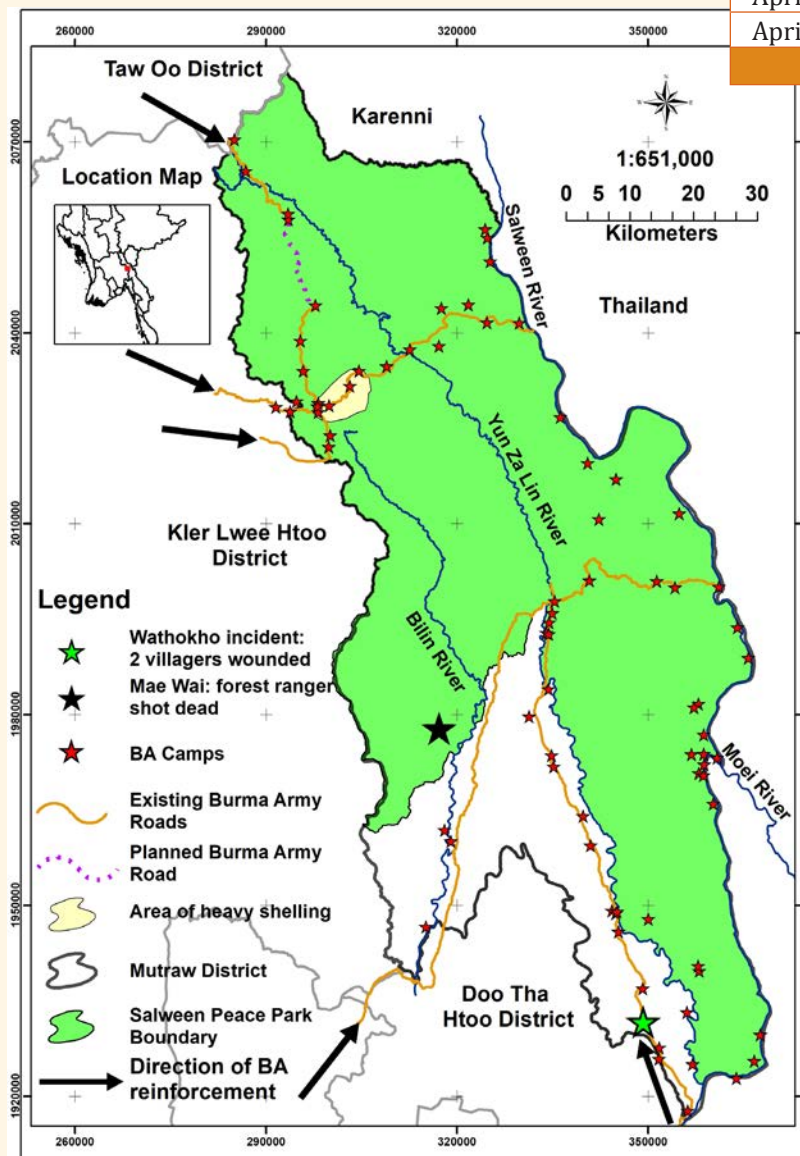
At least thirteen Burma Army battalions have been deployed in northwest Mutraw to push through construction of the new road link: Infantry Battalions (IB) 30, 39, 51, 57, 60, 71, 75, and Light Infantry Battalions (LIB) 350, 439, 589, 590, 598, 603. Since the end of January, these troops have been firing artillery shells nearly every day, about ten kilometers south of the planned road construction area.

Shells have landed in and around the villages of Tah Koo Der and Kuh Day, damaging over 500 acres of farmlands and causing the over 360 inhabitants to flee into the jungle, where they remain until today, facing severe hardship, particularly women and children. The villagers are all subsistence farmers, who are now unable to plant this year's crops.

Over 1,700 people in eleven nearby villages live in constant fear of being shelled, and are poised to flee at any time. These villages are: Maw Law, Thaw Kwet, Saw Ei Der, Thay Baw, Hpla Hkoh Hpo, Toe Hka, Lay Ghaw, Hpaw Mu Ger, Kyoh Muh Lay Der, Saw Ker Der and Hpla Hkoh Doh.

During January to early April 2020, over 500 mortar shells (60 mm and 81 mm) have been fired by the Burma Army in this area. KPSN has documented detailed incidents of shelling as follows:

Date	Time	Number of artillery shells fired
Jan 26, 2020	8:35	2
Jan 29, 2020	15:20	13
Jan 30, 2020	8:10	6
Jan 31, 2020	11:00	12
Feb 3, 2020	10:50	40
Feb 5, 2020	16:00	1
Feb 6, 2020	11:00	13
Feb 8, 2020	9:50-16:00	6
Feb 9, 2020	-	15
Feb 11, 2020	10:30-17:30	20
Feb 27, 2020	8:40	4
Feb 28, 2020	17:40-19:22	43
Mar 4, 2020	13:00	5
Mar 6, 2020	8:00	5
Mar 7, 2020	9:20	31
Mar 8, 2020		15
Mar 9, 2020	11:10-13:30	6
Mar 10, 2020	1:20-7:40	4
Mar 20, 2020	-	2
Mar 22, 2020	9:00-10:10	4
Mar 23, 2020	11:30	20
Mar 26, 2020	7:58	8
Mar 27, 2020	8:00	31
April 1, 2020	7:00	60
April 3, 2020	17:20-20:00	13
April 4, 2020	18:50	1
April 5, 2020	7:55	38
April 6, 2020	19:40- 22:40	32
April 7, 2020	8:30-13:53	49
April 9, 2020	11:45-17:40	20
<b>Total</b>		<b>519</b>



Burma Army offensive in Mutraw, Jan-April 2020



Kuh Day villagers have been forced to dig bunkers to protect themselves from Burma Army shelling



Internally displaced villagers in hiding

**Feb 1, 2020: BA sends spy drone over KNU 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade HQ**

On February 1, the BA sent a surveillance drone over the area of Day Bu Noh village, where the KNU 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade HQ is located. The KNU had sent a formal complaint to the Joint Ceasefire Monitoring Committee of Karen State on January 21, about BA drone surveillance over KNU-controlled areas, but had received no response. Following the drone incident on February, the KNU 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade sent another complaint to the BA Southern Regional Command in Toungoo.

**Feb 4 2020: KNU public ceasefire consultation in Nyaunglebin stopped by BA LIB 124**

On February 4, Lt. Col. Htun Htun Linn of BA LIB 124 ordered the KNU to stop holding a public consultation on the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in Tha Yet Chaung village, Shwe Kyin township, Nyaunglebin District, claiming this had not been approved by the local administrative authority.

**Mar 5, 2020: KNU forest worker shot dead by BA IB 338 while riding a motorcycle**

On March 5, a KNU forest worker called Saw Maw Aye Than was riding a motorcycle with two other forest workers along the road to Hkler Mu Thu Hplei wildlife sanctuary, which forms part of the Salween Peace Park. He was intending to go and discuss wildlife protection with the local villagers.

The road passed through Mae Wai village, where there is a Burma Army camp. When Saw Maw Aye Than was about 200 meters from Mae Wai village, he was shot at by BA troops stationed at the camp. Bullets entered his chest and thigh, injuring him fatally. His friends took him to a nearby village, where he died before being able to receive hospital treatment.

The Mae Wai camp is manned by BA IB 338, led by commander Phyo Phyo Aung. BA Southern Command spokesman Colonel Maung Maung Hla claimed falsely that they had shot Saw Maw Aye Than in self-defence, as the forest workers had attacked the IB 338 outpost.

Mae Wai camp is one of seven Burma Army camps in Mutraw district which the KNU has demanded during ceasefire negotiations for the Burma Army to withdraw from, without success.

**Mar 11, 2020: KNU public ceasefire consultation in Nyaunglebin prevented from being held by BA IB 124**

On March 11, Burma Army IB 124 Major Tha Win Htun and troop commander Wein Ya Htun from the BA base at Baw Ka Hta, stopped the KNU from holding a public consultation on the NCA in Kyauk Kyi township, Nyaunglebin district of Karen State. The KNU had planned to hold a consultation with villagers from Let Kaut Wa and Ma Au Bin.

**Mar 20, 2020: BA LIB 434 troops set fire to hillsides in Buthoe township, Mutraw**

On March 20, Burma Army troops from LIB 434 burned hillside areas at Hee Hpoe Der, Hkaw Pu village tract, Butho township, Mutraw district, destroying forests and upland fields of local villagers.

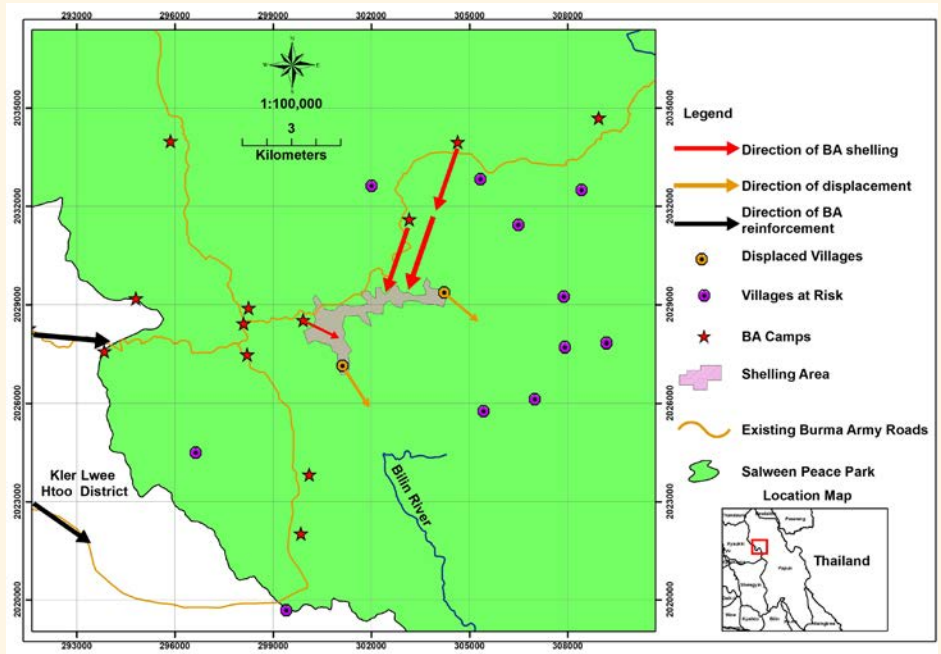
**Mar 23, 2020: BA LIB 589 and IB 48 troops set fire to hillsides near planned road area in northwest Mutraw**

On March 23, 2020, Burma Army troops from LIB 589 and IB 48 cut down trees and burned hillside areas around their camps near Lay Ghaw Der village, Hpla Hkoh village tract, Luthaw township of Mutraw, destroying forests and upland fields of local villagers -- close to the planned new road link.

**Mar 31, 2020: Community forest leader shot dead by BA while shopping for food**

On March 31, at 6:50 pm, Burma Army troops shot and killed community leader Saw Thet Mee, 56 years old, when he was crossing a road at Saw Mu Plaw on his way back to his village of Htee Baw Kee, Luthaw township, Mutraw. He had gone with other villagers to buy food.

Saw Thet Mee was a community forest leader in Kaw Thay Ghuh, an indigenous Karen customary territory in the Salween Peace Park. Saw Thet Mee is survived by his wife and five children.



Area of heavy shelling in N. Mutraw