



Conflicting Priorities

A review of Thailand's humanitarian initiative in Karen State

By the Karen Peace Support Network

This briefing paper provides details of Thailand's humanitarian aid initiative in Hpa-an District of Karen State in March 2024, and raises concerns about the prioritizing of political agendas over the needs of IDPs during implementation.

Background of the Thai humanitarian initiative

The Thai humanitarian initiative to Burma was first mentioned publicly on January 16, 2024, by Thai Foreign Minister Parnpree Bahiddha-Nukara when attending the World Economic Forum at Davos in Switzerland. He said that he hoped the initiative would lead to a humanitarian pause and humanitarian dialogue, and would help with the implementation of ASEAN's Five Point Consensus. The initiative was approved by ASEAN member states at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat in Laos on 29 January.

On February 9, Foreign Minister Parnpree held a press conference in Mae Sot, and announced that the initiative would start within a month, targeting 20,000 people in three townships in Burma. He said the Thai and Myanmar Red Cross Societies would implement the plan, which would be monitored by ASEAN's Coordinating Center for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (the AHA Center).

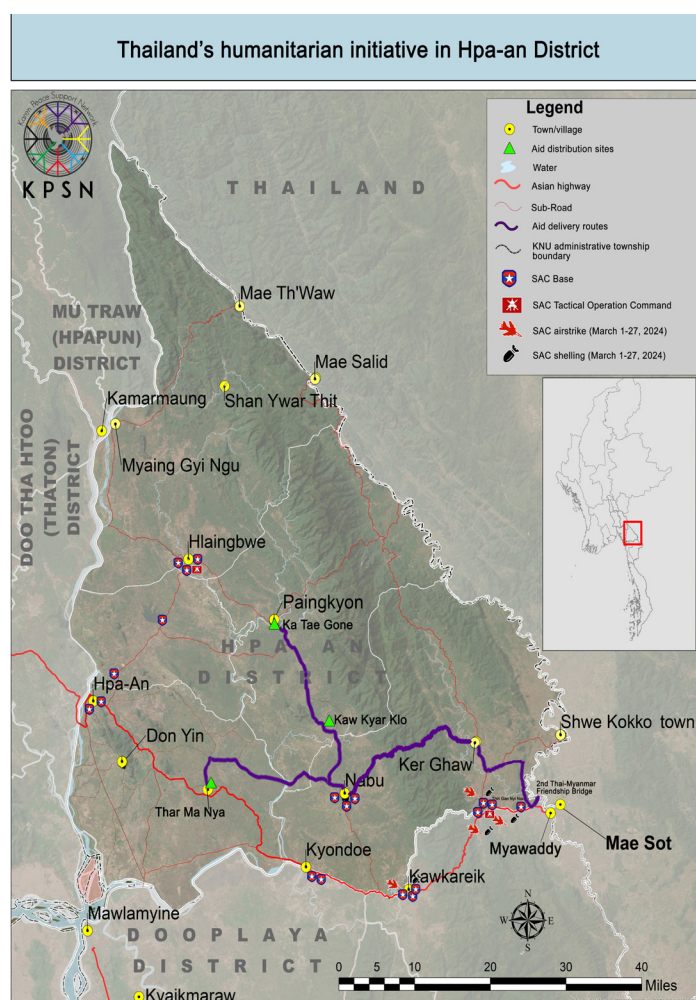
1. Distribution Sites (3 pilot areas)

The 20,000 IDPs targeted for assistance were sheltering in three townships of Hpa-an District, under KNU's Brigade 7. They had mostly fled from escalated fighting between resistance forces and SAC troops in and around Kawkareik town on the Asia Highway since October 2023.

It was agreed with KNU authorities that aid distribution sites would be arranged in each of the three townships.

No.	Township Distribution Sites (Karen name)	Township Distribution Sites (Burmese name)
1	Ta Nay Cha	Nabu
2	Ta Kreh	Paingkyon
3	Doo Yaw	Don Yin

Aid delivery route



The delivery route from the Thai border to the distribution sites was a road running parallel to the Asia Highway, about 30 kms to the north. Since the start of December 2023, when the Kaw Nwe bridge near Kawkareik was destroyed during fighting, the



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.

Summary of aid distribution

No.	Distribution Sites	No. of trucks	No. of aid packs distributed	No. of households assisted	No. of IDPs assisted
1	Kaw Kya Klo (Ta Nay Cha / Na Bu)	4	1,616	2,133	8,791
2	Ka Tae Kon (Ta Kreh/ Paingkyon)	3	958	958	3,313
3	Thar Ma Nya (Doo Yaw/ Don Yin)	3	1,300	1,536	5,712
	Total	10	3,874	4,627	17,816

KNU statement about Thailand's humanitarian aid delivery

On March 27, 2024, the KNU's Central Executive Committee issued a statement which acknowledged the receipt and distribution of 3,874 aid packages to 20,000 IDPs in Hpa-an District, and expressed gratitude to the Royal Thai Government for the humanitarian assistance, but raised concerns about the aid delivery, in particular the involvement of the Myanmar Red Cross Society, which it described as a military reserve force. As stated by the KNU: "Providing aid through the MRCS is showing an indifference to the suffering of the people because MRCS is working for SAC that deliberately targets its own people."

The KNU described a "lack of information" during the delivery, and called for "transparency, accountability, and consultation between the parties on all sides."

The KNU drew attention to its proposed concept for appropriate aid delivery, already sent to ASEAN countries and the Royal Thai Government, which advocated for aid to IDPs in KNU-controlled areas to be provided through a separate channel from aid to IDPs in SAC-controlled areas. Under the KNU model, aid to IDPs in areas under its control should be channelled through local border-based organisations, and should not involve the SAC at all.

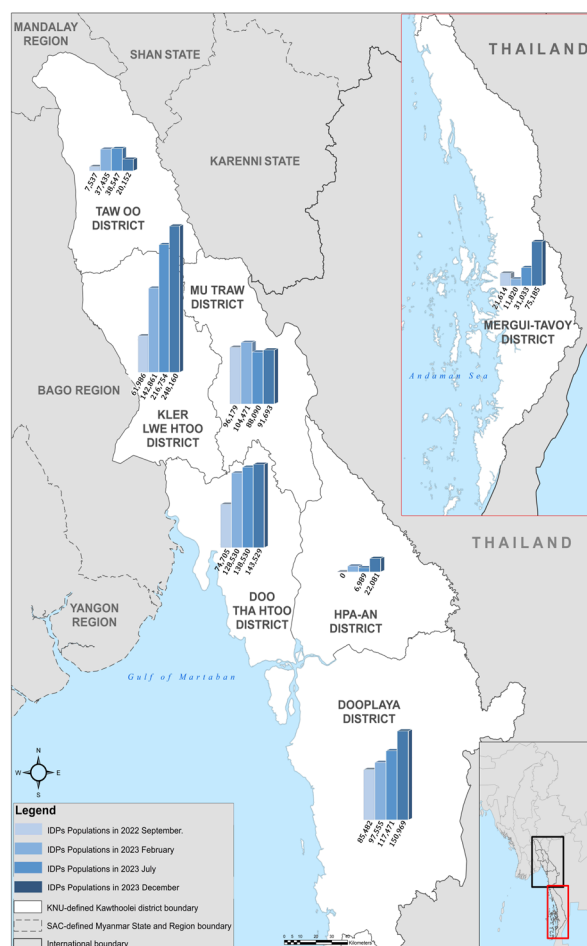
KPSN concerns:

KPSN shares the concerns raised by the KNU Central Committee over the aid delivery, but has further serious concerns, particularly in relation to the targeting of beneficiaries and choice of relief items.

1. Aid was targeted at an IDP area with less urgent needs

The IDP population map published by KPSN on February 1, 2024, shows that Hpa-an District has comparatively far fewer IDPs than most other Karen

Increases in Kawthoolei IDP Population since 2021



districts, where conflict has been much more intense, and where hundreds of thousands of IDPs are facing urgent food shortages while sheltering in the jungle.

This indicates that the reason the aid initiative targeted Hp-an District was not the needs of the IDPs, but rather its relative stability and the fact that the SAC still maintains control of key towns in this area. The initiative could thus be carried out in joint collaboration with the SAC, in accordance with Thailand's stated aim of promoting dialogue between the conflict actors – not least to ensure continued stability along the main trade route being used to bypass the Asia Highway since December 2023.

2. The relief items distributed did not match the priority needs of the IDPs

Since large-scale displacement began in Karen areas after the 2021 coup, KNU administrators and local community based organisations have been coordinating closely to monitor IDP populations and needs, and fundraise accordingly. The main need identified by IDPs in all areas is rice, the staple food they need to survive. Karen aid networks have therefore always prioritized funds for rice. Where possible, IDPs are provided with one month of rice per person (approx. 15 kgs) or the equivalent in cash.

As mentioned earlier, only 5 kgs of rice was provided to each IDP family in the Thai relief packs, enough for one or two days, far below what they needed. It would have been much more cost-effective if the funds spent on other items in the Thai relief packs had been used to purchase rice instead, thereby addressing the actual needs of the IDPs.

3. The SAC regime was allowed to exploit the aid for public relations purposes

Despite being the perpetrator of the attacks on civilians causing large-scale displacement, the SAC regime was given a leading role in the humanitarian initiative, enabling it to exploit the aid for public relations purposes. SAC officials and the regime-aligned MRCS attended the initial ceremony, and then appeared at two of the distribution sites, sharing photos on their social media sites. SAC soldiers were also present, which must have been extremely intimidating and traumatizing for the IDPs, given the long history of human rights abuses by the Burma Army against Karen villagers.

In fact, it was the KNU authorities that organised all the planning and logistics of the distributions, including gathering thousands of IDPs at each site. Letting SAC officials take credit at the distributions, and not even informing the KNU in advance of their presence, was very damaging to the trust of the KNU in the initiative – and detrimental to Thailand's aims of promoting collaboration and dialogue.

Analysis and recommendations

The concerns related to Thailand's humanitarian aid initiative are a direct result of the failure to properly consult and work closely with the KNU authorities and community-based aid networks in planning and implementing assistance.

It is clear that Thailand's political aim – to promote dialogue and collaboration among the conflict actors (not least to protect Thailand's trade interests) – took precedence over humanitarian considerations during the initiative.

KPSN hopes that all stakeholders can learn from this pilot initiative and ensure that IDP needs are prioritized in the future. We support the KNU's call to channel aid to IDPs in Karen areas directly through local border-based organisations, without the involvement of the SAC. It is crucial that aid is channelled through existing local structures for maximum effectiveness.

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