

UNDERMINING THE PEACE PROCESS:

Burmese Army atrocities against civilians in Putao, northern Kachin State

Despite ongoing peace negotiations with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), in early September 2013 Burmese government troops raided the village of Nhka Ga, near Putao in northern Kachin State, accusing the villagers of supporting the KIA. They detained and tortured ten villagers, shot three men to death, and raped the wife of one of the detainees. The troops have since been encamped in the village, restricting all civilian movement.

This military operation is linked to the securing of control over northern Kachin State's rich timber and mineral resources. Nhka Ga village lies in a strategic location on a road being built from the China border to large concession areas recently granted to billionaire crony Tay Za.

These atrocities and exploitation belie the Burmese government's claims to be establishing peace in the ethnic states.

Spread of conflict to Putao

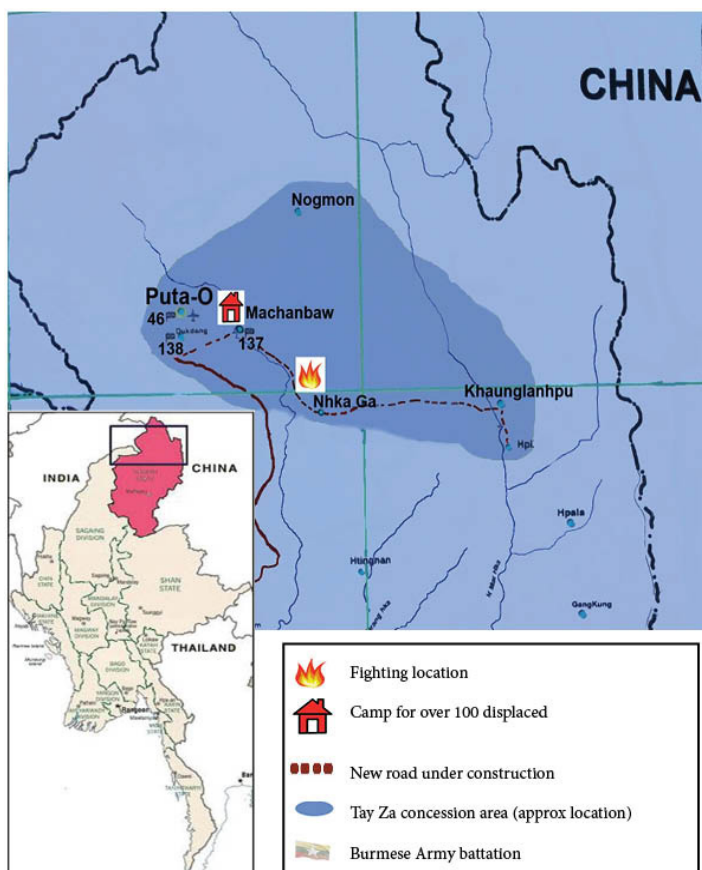
The renewed conflict between the KIA and the Burmese government since June 2011 has mostly affected southern Kachin State and northern Shan State, where 364 villages have been partially or totally abandoned, and over 100,000 civilians displaced. However, in August 2013, fighting spread to the remote Putao area of northern Kachin State, causing new displacement.

The spread of conflict is linked to Burmese military expansion along a new road being built between

Putao, Machanbaw and Khaunglanhpu, near the Chinese border. Currently, the journey from Putao to the Chinese border takes about ten days. The new road will take only three days, facilitating export of natural resources, including timber and minerals, to China. Billionaire tycoon and military crony Tay Za has been granted a 600,000 acre concession area around Putao. Timber in this area includes coffin wood, highly valued in China.

There are three Burmese military battalions based near Putao: LIB 46, 137, and 138. Troops were sent to reinforce the road, which cuts through the KIA's 7th Battalion area. LIB 137 has an outpost on the road, close to Nhka Ga.

On August 28, 2013, Burmese troops clashed with KIA troops in Nhka Ga, causing most of the villagers to flee. Some fled to the town of Machan Baw (one day's journey by boat), and some fled into the jungle. On August 29, more Burmese troops entered the village of Nhka Ga, searching for missing fellow soldiers, and proceeded to commit grave human rights violations against the villagers in punishment for their alleged support of the KIA. They have been stationed there ever since.



Timeline of fighting and abuses in Nhka Ga

Aug 28, 2013 Burmese troops from LIB 137 fought with KIA troops in Nhka Ga village. Nearly all the villagers fled, either to Machan Baw or into the jungle.

Aug 29, 2013 Burmese troops from LIB 137, led by Lt. Col. Myo Myint Tun, and LIB 138, led by strategic commander Zaw Tun Han, moved into Nhka Ga. They beat and kicked a deaf mute left behind in the village.

Sept 2, 2013 Burmese troops arrested and detained 10 male villagers in the headman's house, torturing them for 4 days. They also detained about 20 women and children in the Church hall for 4 days.

Sept 2, 2013 The wife of one of the detained men was raped by a Burmese officer

Sept 5, 2013 Two of the detained villagers were shot dead by Burmese troops. Another villager was also shot dead, but the date of death is not known.

Detailed human rights violations

Arbitrary detention and torture of male villagers

On September 2 2013, the Burmese soldiers arrested ten men from Nhka Ga village, accusing them of supporting the KIA. Their names were:

1. Lahken Hkaw Tup, aged 37
2. Yung Hka Hkyen, aged 18
3. Rev. Ram Mai, aged 71

4. Nhtung Hka la Awng, aged 51
5. Assistant pastor Mahkrin Hpung, aged 60
6. Di Rum, aged 23
7. Ah Jung Seng Awng, aged 25
8. Agu Sin, aged 17
9. Shin Sai, age n.a.
10. Di Shin, aged 21

The men were detained together in the headman's house, blindfolded with cloth, and interrogated. They were asked questions like: "Are you all KIA soldiers?" "How many of you are KIA soldiers in the village?" Whatever they answered, they were beaten with rifle butts and kicked with army boots. One of the villagers was thrown from the upper storey of the building to the ground outside. Finally the villagers refused to answer any questions, telling the Burmese troops they were going to die anyway. The main interrogators were: Lt. Col. Myo Myint Tun, Lt. Da Shi Di, and two other soldiers, all from LIB 137.

The villagers were deprived of food for three days, and finally released on September 6. The day before they were released, on 5 September 2013, two of the ten men were taken away and killed (see below).

Arbitrary detention of women and children; looting of property

On September 2, the same day the ten men were arrested, the remaining villagers, numbering around 20, including women and children, were forced to stay together in the local church hall (about 27 feet x 18 feet). The soldiers fetched food from their houses for them to cook at the hall. When they were released after four days, they went back home and found their belongings had been stolen, including money, blankets, clothes and other valuables.

Extrajudicial killings

The two villagers among the group of ten detained at the headman's house, who were taken outside and killed on September 5 were:

1. Lahken Hkaw Tup, aged 37



Nhka Ga villagers on 27 September 2013

(Photo by a pastor who visited the village under tight Burmese military security)

2. Yung Hka Hkyen, aged 18

After the other villagers were released on September 6, they searched and found the bodies of the two men, who had been shot to death just outside the village.

They also found the body of another villager, Mahkrin La Ring, outside the village. He had also been shot dead, but it is not known when he was killed.

Another male corpse was found near the village, but it was so badly decomposed that no one could identify him.

Forced to sign false testimony

Four of the ten villagers detained in the headman's house on September 2, Ning Sai, Ja Naw, Ning Wawm Thing and Srn. Nang Shin, were forced to sign on the bottom of a plain piece of paper when they were released on September 6. After they had signed, Lt. Col. Myo Myint Tun wrote on the paper "The Burmese army did not take any property from the villagers. Please stay with us and guard our village. We are not going to move anywhere."

Rape by military officer

"Ma Kaw" (not her real name), the wife of the one of the men arrested in the headman's house, was detained with other villagers in the church hall. At 7 pm in the evening of September 2, she requested permission from the soldiers guarding the hall to go and see Major Zaw Tun Hang, commanding officer of LIB 138, to beg for her husband's release. When she went to see Major Zaw Tun Hang, in another house, the officer threatened her and accused her of being linked to the KIA, then raped her. She returned crying back to the hall at 9 pm.

Restriction of villagers' movement in Nhka Ga

There remain about 40 villagers in Nhka Ga. The Burmese troops are still stationed in the village, staying in the villagers' homes. Villagers who want to leave the village, to farm or buy necessities, need to request permission from the soldiers.

Displaced villagers in Machanbaw pressured to return home

There are currently over 100 IDPs sheltering in a church compound in Machanbaw. About 60 are from Nhka Ga, while others are from the nearby villages of Ure Yang and Nong Khai. They are surviving on donations from the church and local communities. They have received no international aid. There are many cases of malaria among the IDPs.

Since last September, military officers from LIB 137 have been visiting the IDPs and urging them to return to their original villages. However, the IDPs do not dare return to their homes yet.

Another recent case of military rape in Putao

On November 27, 2012, a 26-year-old woman from Lung Sha Yang village was gang-raped in her farm hut by seven Burmese soldiers from command post 33 near Putao.

"Ah Mi" (not her real name), married with two children, had gone with her husband to look after their farm. The seven soldiers came to their farm hut and asked her husband to go and buy them cigarettes at about 3.25 pm. While he was away, they gang raped Ah Mi. One held her head, and another her legs, while they raped her one after the other. When the husband returned at about 4.15 pm, the soldiers threatened they would kill him if he reported the rape. They said to him: "Even if you tell other people, there is no one who will take action. We have the authority to rape women."

The couple reported the crime to the head of their village, but he didn't taken any action. Ah Mi fell seriously ill after the incident.

Recommendations of the Kachin Women's Association of Thailand (KWAT)

Establishing trust is at the core of peace-building. The ongoing attacks on Kachin areas are effectively destroying any trust built up between the Kachin Independence Organisation and the Burmese government. It makes a mockery of the peace talks; to talk of peace while engaging in conflict undermines the integrity of the entire process.

To the Burmese government:

- Immediately put an end to the human rights abuses being perpetrated against civilians
- Cease military offensives against the Kachin people and other ethnic nationalities and withdraw troops from the conflict areas.
- Conduct meaningful dialogue with all the ethnic opposition, including not only armed groups but also civil society, towards a political settlement which will bring lasting peace throughout the country.
- Allow humanitarian aid agencies to freely access and provide aid to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Kachin-controlled areas.
- Suspend all government-initiated investment and development plans in ethnic areas that have proceeded without the agreement of local people

To the international community:

- Pressure the Burmese government to begin troop withdrawal from Kachin and other ethnic conflict areas and enter into political dialogue with the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) towards a process of political reform, and ensure that all stakeholders, including women, are able to participate in this process.
- Provide more humanitarian aid through community-based organizations (CBOs) working cross-border to assist IDPs in Kachin-controlled areas.
- Suspend all investments in ethnic conflict areas until there is a negotiated political settlement to the civil war.

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