

International Rivers Day Statement - Karen Rivers Watch



Say No to Military Action and Destructive Energy Project that Endanger Peace

On 14 March 2018, Karen Rivers Watch (KRW) is calling on the Burma Army and the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led government to demonstrate their commitment to peace by ending all military operations in Karen and other ethnic states, as well as to halt all large hydropower dam planning and construction. These activities threaten both the people of Burma and the natural environment.

KRW condemns the Burma Army for repeatedly undermining the country's peace process. On 4th March 2018, the military began its most recent violation of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with regard to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The armed forces deployed more than 600 soldiers across ceasefire lines in Mutraw District of northern Karen State, forcing 1,500 people from 14 villages to flee their land and homes, including many who left under fire from Burma Army troops. Members of these communities are now surviving as internally displaced people (IDPs) in the jungle, their futures uncertain.

Despite the signing of the NCA by the Karen National Union (KNU) in 2015, the Burma Army has steadily increased troop numbers in Karen areas, leading to intensified armed conflict. Between 2015 and 2016, under governments led by both the Union Solidarity and Development Party and the NLD, the Burma Army and its paramilitary Border Guard Forces (BGFs) have clashed more than 40 times with troops from the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army and its splinter group, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, and the KNLA, the armed wing of the KNU.

"Peace should mean an end to the need to flee and hide in the jungle. This is not peace," said Naw Ta Mla Saw of the Karen Women's Organization. "These actions by the Burma Army show refugees and IDPs that there is nowhere safe to return to. Women and children are hiding in the jungle with little food. These actions by the army—and the silence of the NLD government—show us, sadly, that peace is not at hand."

KRW is also calling for a moratorium on all large infrastructure, energy, and extractive projects in Karen areas until genuine peace is established through political dialogue, leading to the implementation of a participatory federal system throughout Burma. Fourteen large dams planned or currently under construction within the Salween River basin threaten to destroy one of the world's last great free-flowing rivers. If built, these hydropower projects would not only dispossess the already marginalized ethnic communities who have survived the world's longest running civil war, it would also make permanent the militarization of these fragile regions.

In September 2016, just weeks after the elected NLD-led government declared its support for the damming of the Salween River, conflict broke out near the proposed Hatgyi Dam site, located between Karen State's Hpa-an and Mutraw districts. Military-backed BGF battalions took control of the main supply route to the dam site, forcing 5,000 Karen people to flee their villages. Many continue to languish in makeshift camps in conditions of extreme poverty. Also, the government construction of another new road to connect with the eastern side of the dam site threatens to provoke further armed conflict and insecurity for local communities.

Government support for the Salween dams threatens to dispossess hundreds of thousands of ethnic people of their land and livelihoods, including refugees and IDPs who have already been forced to flee armed conflict. Ultimately, these energy projects will export electricity, but import social problems and environmental destruction to river systems that support the lives of millions of people in Karen, Karenni, Mon, and Shan states.

"You will never achieve peace by selling off the rivers that are the very lifeblood of our people," said Saw Tha Poe, coordinator of Karen Rivers Watch.

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