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Situation Update: Conflict and Displacement in Burma's Border Areas
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Armed conflict in Burma's Karen, Shan and Kachin States continues to fuel large-scale displacement of civilians both internally and into neighbouring countries. Between 5,000 and 7,000 civilians remain in temporary, unofficial sites along the Thai-Burma border in Thailand's Tak Province; approximately 20,000 remain internally-displaced in Kachin State along the border with China; and thousands have been forced to flee their homes in Shan State due to ongoing armed conflict. Community-based groups continue in their efforts to provide assistance to these populations, who have no access to international protection mechanisms, and little or no assistance from international humanitarian organisations. The shortage of funding to such community-based aid networks is a serious cause for concern, particularly with a high likelihood of further fighting resulting in more displacement. There is an urgent need for protection mechanisms and humanitarian assistance for civilians fleeing conflict and human rights abuses in Burma.

Armed Conflict and Abuses against Civilians Continue: An Update of the Situation

Karen State

In Karen State, civilians continue to live amidst multiple violent conflicts. In addition to the ongoing fighting between the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) and the Burma Army which caused around 25,000 to flee into neighbouring Thailand in November 2010, skirmishes between Burma Army troops and Karen National Liberation Army's (KNLA) Brigade 7 are ongoing. Meanwhile, in Manerplaw, Thoo Mwe Htar and other areas in Southern Papun District fighting between a break-away faction of the regime's Border Guard Force (BGF), known as Battalion 1012, and Burma Army forces have increased in frequency throughout July and into August. According to the Karen Teachers Working Group, Burma Army soldiers are engaged in episodes of fighting everyday, either with the DKBA, KNLA or the BGF splinter group.¹

On 30th June, the renegade BGF Battalion 1012, under the command of Major Saw Beeh, attacked a Burma Army camp at Ka Ma Maung Township in Papun District. Shells landed in nearby villages, destroying houses and a bridge. Local males fled the area after the Burma Army begun forcibly recruiting people to work as their porters.² In the first week of August further

¹ Karen Information Centre, 'Fighting closes 14 schools', 3rd August 2011

² Karen Information Centre, 'BGF Attacks Burma Army Camp, 30th June 2011

fighting between BGF Battalion 1012 and Burma Army troops caused mortar shells to fall on villages in the Hlaingbwe area, Pa'an District. As a result, 14 local schools have been forced to close.³

There were more than 30 incidences of fighting between KNLA troops and Burma Army forces in July alone, with particularly heavy combat taking place between 17th and 30th July in Papun District.⁴ Various KNLA battalions have grown in numbers during August, with around 80 soldiers defecting from the centrally-controlled BGF to join its ranks in Pa'an and Hlaing Bwe Townships⁵.

Meanwhile, on 21st July, allied DKBA and KNLA forces clashed with the Burma Army and its allied BGF in attacks in Myawaddy Township, about 5-6km from the Thai-Burma border. The high insecurity in this area is already pushing civilians to flee their homes, after attacks by unknown gunmen at Three Pagodas Pass last month. Episodes of fighting in July in Htee Per, Hlaing Bwe Township, which is occupied by the KNLA's and DKBA's allied forces, are also prompting concerns that conflict will drive further displacement, both internally and into Thailand.

In mid-July, attacks by the Burma Army and its allied Border Guard Force were targeted directly at civilian areas raising serious concerns. On 21st July, mortar shells were fired at five villages (including Tamoya and Mael villages) in Pa'an District's Hlaing Bwe Township. Between 500 and 600 villagers fled towards the DKBA headquarters at Myaing Gyi Ngu, although some were captured and forced to work as porters for the Burma Army. These IDPs are now particularly vulnerable, living in the jungle with little recourse to food and clean water.



A villager rests in a temporary hiding site close to the Thai-Burma border

In addition, conflict-related abuses continue, discouraging those seeking safety in Thailand from returning to Karen State. Many are afraid of being forced to work as porters for the Burma Army, and of forced conscription. In early July, more than 30 farmers in Papun District were ordered to abandon their land and report to the Burma Army for portering duty. Any who refused had their plantations burnt.⁶

³ Karen Information Centre, 'Fighting closes 14 schools', 3rd August 2011

⁴ Karen National Union, Situation Report, July 2011

⁵ Karen Information Centre, 'BGF in chaos - another 80 join Karen army', 23rd August 2011

⁶ Karen Information Centre, 'Burma army threatens force villagers to abandon farms', 9th July 2011

Kachin State

Since the breakdown of a 13-year-old ceasefire between the Burma Army and the Kachin Independence Organisation's (KIO) armed wing, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), on 9th June this year, episodes of fighting continue to be frequent. The KIO rejected the regime's offer to engage in a ceasefire dialogue on 18th August, due to its unsatisfactory terms⁷. In addition to its own forces, the regime has deployed several hundred Kachin soldiers from state militia groups and its centrally-controlled Border Guard Force (BGF) to fight against KIA troops. Observers believe this is a strategic measure to create intra-ethnic clashes within Kachin State and therefore attempt to divide its opposition⁸. Heavy fighting took place on 2nd July in Mohnyin Township, and on 3rd July in N'mawk Township in Bhamo District, close to a KIA base⁹. Further battles took place on 16th and 17th July (Waimaw Township); 21st July (Kha Chin Village, Manje Township)¹⁰; 26th July (Chipwi Township and Sinbo in Mohnyin Township)¹¹; 4th August (near Kamaing)¹²; and on 18th August (Wawang Kumbang, in Bhamo District)¹³.

In conflict-affected areas, abuses against civilians continue, resulting in further displacement. The Burma Army routinely captures civilians and forced them to work as porters or to bury deceased troops¹⁴. Furthermore, ethnic Kachin women are being targeted: Since 9th June, Burma Army soldiers have raped a total of 32 women¹⁵.

Shan State

Civilians in Northern Shan State continue to experience heavy fighting and widespread human rights abuses. Almost 50 separate incidences of fighting have taken place between the Burma Army and the Shan State Army North (SSA-N) forces between 2nd July and 5th August. The offensives by the Burma Army were particularly severe in mid-July around its Nampook military base, where the roads to Mongyai, Kesi and Monghsu Townships meet. On 13th July,



Kachin communities flee from armed conflict

⁷ Kachin News Group, 'KIO rejects government's offer for peace talks', 20 August 2011

⁸ Kachin News Group, 'Burmese Army applies intra-tribal clash tactics in war on Kachin', 11th July 2011

⁹ Kachin News Group, 'War Continues between KIA and Burmese Army', 4th July 2011

¹⁰ Kachin News Group, 'Burmese deputy battalion commander and three troops killed by KIA', 21st July 2011

¹¹ Kachin News Group, 'Burmese-Kachin fighting takes place at three locations' 26th July 2011

¹² Kachin News Group, Burmese lieutenant and soldier killed by KIA, 5th August 2011

¹³ Kachin News Groups, 'Burmese Army KIA fight at Wawang Kumbang', 18th August 2011

¹⁴ Kachin News Group, 'Burmese army brutally kills a Kachin farmer', 2nd August 2011

¹⁵ Karen Information Centre, 'Burma Army targets ethnic women', 26th July 2011

two Burma Army aircraft bombed joint SSA-N and Shan State Army-South forces stationed near Wankaipha village in Mong Yai Township¹⁶. This attack was followed by the firing of mortar shells, leading to the desertion of approximately 20 villages in the locality¹⁷.

Over 30,000 people have been displaced in Shan State since the Burma Army began renewed offensives in March this year¹⁸. A large number of human rights abuses are occurring daily, such as forced portering, torture and the forced relocation or destruction of households suspected of supporting SSA-N troops. In addition, between 5th July and 2nd August, Burma Army soldiers raped seven female civilians, including one pregnant woman, two detainees and one 12-year-girl.¹⁹

An Update on Civilian Displacement

Significant numbers of civilians from Karen, Kachin and Shan State continue to flee from violence and human rights abuses. They have little or no recourse to international protection mechanisms, and face food security and health concerns.

The situation for those civilians who fled from Karen State to Thai soil following the November 2010 elections remains unstable. Around one third of these populations have been forced to seek means of survival locally in Thailand as illegal migrant workers. The prohibitive costs and difficulties involved in applying for work permits leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. Some have returned to their villages inside Burma and a minority are seeking permission to enter the



A villager recovers from a landmine injury in June 2011

official refugee camps. However, a population of between 5000 and 7000 continue to live in extremely vulnerable conditions in temporary 'hiding sites' along the border. These populations display a willingness to return to their villages and attend to their cultivations, but are afraid of both the landmines scattered in the area and the possibility of further fighting breaking out. Unfortunately these fears are

well-founded, particularly in Phop Phra District. By

illustration, in mid-July twenty families who had returned to their villages in Karen State were forced to flee across the border once again after fighting reignited. On 17th and 18th July respectively, two Karen labourers were injured after stepping on landmines in Tae Thone Lone

¹⁶ Mizzima News, 'SSA Troops 'bombed' by government aircraft', 14th July 2011

¹⁷ Shan Herald Agency for News, 'Fighting intensifies around rebel HQ', 18th July 2011

¹⁸ Shan Human Rights Foundation and Shan Women's Action Network, Joint Press Release: 'Update of Fighting Incidences in Northern Shan State July 2011', 10th August 2011

¹⁹ Shan Human Rights Foundation and Shan Women's Action Network, Joint Press Release: 'Update Summary of Human Rights Abuses in Northern Shan State July 2011', 10th August 2011

village, close to Three Pagodas Pass town²⁰. A further incidence occurred on 20th July in the Phop Phra area, injuring a 25-year-old man.

The lack of policies and procedures to protect newly-arrived civilians fleeing into Thailand is pushing increasing numbers of people into precarious, unofficial hiding sites, illegal employment and leaving many vulnerable to trafficking networks.

Kachin State

Over 20,000 civilians have been displaced within Kachin State since war broke out in June this year, with many fleeing to KIO-controlled areas near the China border. As of 6th July, it is estimated that between 15,000 and 17,000 refugees remain along the border with China sheltering in churches, temples and make-shift bamboo tents in the jungle. In addition, between 3,000 and 4,500 people have fled to towns and cities such as Myitkyina, Wai Maw, Sinbo, Shwebo and Bhamo. Chinese authorities have limited the movement of refugees into China²¹.

Around half of the refugees have been accommodated in at least nine temporary camps in Laiza and other areas close to the China-Burma border. The remaining half are staying independently in make-shift sites in the forests. The lack of access to drinking water, adequate shelter materials and health assistance in these isolated locations leaves them extremely vulnerable to diarrhoea and diseases such as dengue and malaria, given that it is currently the rainy season²².

Emergency Response & Assistance by Community Organisations

Given the restricted access of international humanitarian organisations, the survival of Burma's displaced populations is largely reliant upon the assistance efforts of members of their own communities. Community aid groups are utilising their knowledge of the local area and their community networks to provide emergency provisions and mitigate the poor humanitarian conditions and food security crisis which these populations currently face. However a shortage of funding is threatening this vital support.

After the violent aftermath of the November 2010 elections forced 25,000 people from Karen State across the border to seek safety, local volunteers from the Forum of Community Organisations – Burma (FCOB) mobilised its Emergency Assistance and Relief Team (EART) to provide humanitarian assistance to the displaced communities. This included dry food rations, materials for temporary shelters (such as sleeping mats and mosquito nets) and hygiene kits. Since February 2011, this support was reduced to the provision of rice, fish paste and beans. In June, external support to the FCOB's emergency team was terminated and as a result it has further reduced its provision of food assistance. Displaced civilians in Umphang and Tha Song Yang Districts were identified as particularly vulnerable due to their distance from their homes and the ongoing fighting there. Therefore, community volunteers from FCOB's emergency team have been delivering sacks of rice to these populations throughout July and August. They have

²⁰ IMNA, 'Labourer injured by landmine in Three Pagodas Pass, 21st July 2011

²¹ Kachin News Group, 'China limits border crossings after Burmese mortar fire on the KIO capital', 23rd July 2011

²² Kachin News Group, 'China supplies medicine to Kachin refugees for the first time, 21st July

the capacity to continue this assistance for one more month only. Populations staying in Phop Phra were provided with rice during the first two weeks of July.

In addition, in order to provide protection and some stability and continuity of education for displaced children, FCOB established boarding houses in which more than 300 children have been accommodated. EART's food assistance to these boarding houses will also cease at the end of August, but operations will continue through independent funds.

The Back Pack Health Worker Team sent three emergency teams to KawKareik and Hlaing Bwe Townships to provide medical assistance in the wake of fighting in mid-July. Two of these will remain in the area and transform into a permanent BPHWT units.

In Kachin State, the Chinese local authorities have supplied US\$15,625 worth of medicine to Kachin refugees along its southwest border, but international aid organisations have no access to the displaced populations. FCOB's emergency team is supporting local Kachin community groups through the provision of food items, such as rice and cooking oil, sleeping mats and shelter materials. 7683 people have been assisted. The relief teams have bases in Myitkyina, Wai Maw, Bhamo and Laiza, where volunteer are distributing assistance through religious networks and youth groups²³. In addition, BPHWT sent one additional emergency team to the area. Chinese-based



Displaced civilians in Kachin State queue for food assistance

Kachin communities living across the border in Yingjiang County are also a welcome source of support, supplying sacks of rice and zinc roofs to the refugees in Laiza in July²⁴. However, relief efforts are hindered by the insecurity in certain areas, making it difficult to reach some populations and meet their humanitarian needs. The assistance is still insufficient to mitigate the severe humanitarian needs of the displaced populations.

²³ Kachin Development Network Group & All Kachin Student and Youth Union, Aid Plan, 6th July 2011

²⁴ Kachin News Group, 'China supplies medicine to Kachin refugees for the first time, 21st July

Conclusions and Recommendations

As communities in Burma's border areas continue to face increased risks to their safety and livelihoods, there is an urgent need for mechanisms to ensure that civilians are not unnecessarily exposed to further risks. The nature of the displacement, with smaller groups spread across a multitude of locations, and the lack of access for larger aid organisations, presents real challenges to creating an efficient and effective humanitarian response. Given that armed conflict along Burma's border areas is highly likely to continue in the coming months, leading to further civilian displacement inside Burma as well as into neighbouring countries, we propose the following recommendations:

- Donors and the international community must **support those organisations providing humanitarian assistance** to displaced civilians in Burma's border areas;
- The governments of Burma's neighbouring countries must **provide temporary asylum** to displaced civilians and **grant humanitarian groups the access necessary** to provide them with vital assistance. These civilians should be allowed to remain until their return can be safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable;
- The international community must continue to **exert pressure on the Burmese regime to engage in meaningful political dialogue** with representatives of ethnic groups and the democratic opposition, in order to reach a peaceful and sustainable end to the ongoing armed conflict.