



Asian Highway project undermines peace in Karen State

Outbreak of heavy fighting along the newly completed highway from Myawaddy to Kawkaeik demonstrates how large-scale development, when implemented before a permanent ceasefire and political agreement, exacerbates conflict, undermines the peace process, and jeopardizes the safety of civilians. All parties must immediately halt hostilities, and resolve issues related to the highway through dialogue in the peace process.

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(10 July 2015) – The Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN) is alarmed by recent fighting between the Burma Army and the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) along the recently completed section of the Asian Highway between Myawaddy and Kawkaeik. The Burma Army began heavy fire on DKBA positions along the road in the early morning of 2 July. Fighting has lasted for one week, has spread to other parts of Karen State, and tensions remain high. This is the fourth instance of armed clashes in the area in the past year, breaking out amidst rising tensions over control of the highway, which is slated to officially open later this month.

The fighting has severely jeopardized the safety of civilians. Two villagers have been shot dead by the Burma Army between Pway Muh Hklay and Beh Htee Htar village, in Hlaingbwe township, and at least two more were injured near Kawkaeik. The fighting has disrupted road traffic, leaving many civilians unable to travel, including migrant workers and those in need of urgent medical care. After a school in Kawkaeik was hit by heavy artillery, many schools in the area are closed, and parents are afraid to send their children to school.

The situation along the Asian Highway follows the same pattern seen again and again in Burma's ethnic areas, where large-scale development projects are pushed ahead in conflict zones. Temporary ceasefire agreements fail to bring meaningful peace, instead facilitating land grabs for destructive projects under centralized control and increased militarization. This in turn reignites conflict. Karen people cannot trust the peace process while the Burma Army continues its military campaign to control ethnic territory. This should be a time for dialogue, not fighting.

The road project in question has long been mired in controversy. Promoted as a crucial link in the Asian Highway 1 (AH1), which would span more than 20,000 km from Tokyo to Istanbul, highway construction in Karen State has been accompanied by land confiscation, forced labor, and militarization. Delayed because of conflict, the project was revived in 2012 after ceasefire agreements between Karen armed groups and the Burma Army, and completed quickly with \$38 million in funding from the Thai government. The highway project is also critical for completion of the East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC), a flagship project of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The ADB is currently preparing to

loan \$100 million to the Burma government to upgrade an adjoining section of the highway, from Kawkaik to Eindu, where villagers also fear land confiscation.

Road projects have the potential to bring benefits for rural communities in Karen State, but only if implemented in a democratic and transparent manner. The reality is these roads are being built in conflict zones, where massive displacement has already occurred, information is withheld from local communities and civil society, and villagers are vulnerable to human rights violations. Large-scale projects in Karen State should wait until a full peace agreement can be reached, democratic rights guaranteed, and a decentralized federal union achieved. Instead, motivated by the potential for massive profits from cross-border trade, highway proponents have quickly pushed the risky project to completion.

KPSN makes the following recommendations:

1. All parties to the conflict should halt hostilities, and resolve issues related to the highway through dialogue in the peace process instead of force.
2. The Karen National Union (KNU) should continue efforts to mediate a peaceful resolution to current disputes along the Asian highway.
3. All parties should allow access for CBOs, NGOs and INGOs to provide humanitarian assistance to the affected areas.
4. The Burma Army and Karen armed groups should agree to and follow a code of conduct and set up an independent monitoring mechanism, in order to guarantee security for civilians along the Asian Highway, prevent further outbreaks of fighting, and build trust in the peace process.
5. All parties should work towards a durable, transparent, and long-term, political solution to promote viable and equitable peace in the region.
6. Thailand, ADB, JICA and other development actors financing large-scale development projects in Karen State should re-evaluate their approach to be conflict-sensitive. They should align their strategy according to recent political developments on the ground, in order to reduce risk to their investment and reputation.
7. Civil society and local communities should be actively engaged throughout the peace process and highway project.

About the Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN)

KPSN (formerly KCBPSN) is the largest network of Karen civil society organizations in Burma. Its member organizations have been providing support for vulnerable people and communities in this conflict-torn region for decades, striving to empower local communities, build transparent and accountable institutions, and help create a sustainable peace in Burma. The network is dedicated to:

- Raising awareness of the peace process and of human-rights issues among Karen communities
- Building the capacity of communities to advocate for and realize their rights
- Providing practical support for communities to create sustainable livelihoods and improve their quality of life
- Supporting Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and returnees
- Monitoring the peace process
- Facilitating consultation and advocacy for a sustainable and equitable peace in Burma

The following KPSN members officially endorse this statement:

	Organization	Acronym
1	Burma Issues	BI
2	Back Pack Health Worker Team	BPHWT
3	Karen Affairs Committee	KAC
4	Karen Development Committee	KDC
5	Karen Education Department	KED
6	Karen Environmental and Social Action Network	KESAN
7	Karen Human Rights Group	KHRG
8	Karen Office for Relief and Development	KORD
9	Karen Refugee Committee	KRC
10	Karen Refugee Committee Education Entity	KRCEE
11	Karen Rivers Watch	KRW
12	Karen Student Network Group	KSNG
13	Karen Teacher Working Group	KTWG
14	Karen Women Empowerment Group	KWEG
15	Karen Women Organization	KWO
16	Karen Youth Organization	KYO
17	Mae Tao Clinic	MTC
18	Hsar Mu Htaw	HMH
19	Hku Po Ka Paw	HPKP
20	Karen Environment Network	KEN
21	Youth Circle	YC
22	Mutraw Community Development Committee	MCDC
23	Taw Oo Development Committee	TODC
24	Thwee Development Network	TDN
25	Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People	CIDKP

