

# Karen State September 2016 Conflict

## The Real Motivations behind Renewed War

KAREN  
RIVERS  
WATCH



ကညီတံကျာ်သွဲကဟုကယံထံကျိထံကျိ



(Photo : KRW)

### Fighting directly linked to Hatgyi Dam

While the Burmese government and Karen leaders are holding historic peace talks in Naypyidaw, the Burma Army and its Border Guard Force (BGF) wages war in Karen State to expand its control over Karen territories, in order to push for an environmentally and socially destructive hydropower project on the Salween River – the Hatgyi Dam.

Karen Rivers Watch, a network of Karen community-based organizations working to protect the Salween River, calls attention to the fact that this is not the first time that the Burma military has instigated conflict in Karen State to take control of Hatgyi Dam area. From September to October 2014, a series of violent clashes caused chaos across both Mon and Karen states, displacing over 2,000 people.<sup>1</sup> Two years later, the Burma military is taking the same steps once again in Karen State, instead of de-escalating existing conflicts.

The Burma Army is taking advantage of the BGF-Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) splinter group conflict to take new territory and reinforce its forward positions in Karen State, in order to ensure that the Hatgyi Dam project can move ahead without opposition. In the process of doing so, the Burma Army and the BGF have displaced over 5,000 people from their homes in a matter of days, many of whom have taken shelter in Myaing Gyi Ngu town.

### The Burma military's actions only serve elite interests, not the people of Burma

Currently, the political landscape is vastly different from the 2014 conflict. Though the central government is now led by the National League for Democracy (NLD), the Burma military still acts with impunity to seize land for the purpose of destructive development. If the militarization of Karen State continues to intensify, it will only lead to more conflicts as the Burma Army and BGF push into Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) territory. It is clear that the Burma Army and BGF are seeking to consolidate geographic control over the Hatgyi Dam area, which would involve crossing the ceasefire line into KNLA 5th Brigade territory - contravening the terms of the USDP-led government's Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) terms.

This continued military action endangers Karen people's lives and the national peace process. Karen state, and Burma at large, cannot be allowed to slide back into civil war and prolonged suffering for the sake of a dam that is not built for the Karen people of the Salween River basin, nor for the people of Burma. The vast majority of the electricity generated will be sent to Thailand, and even the waters of the Salween may also be diverted to Thailand.

<sup>1</sup> For more information, please see Karen Rivers Watch (2014), "Afraid to Go Home" pp. 6-8.

<http://www.kesan.asia/index.php/reports/viewdownload/4-reports/156-afraid-to-go-home-recent-violent-conflict-and-human-rights-abuses-in-karen-state>



(Photo : KRW)

## Timeline of September 2016 conflict near Hatgyi Dam

**Aug. 28:** Thai newspaper reports that EGAT is interested in restarting discussions with the Burma government about the Hatgyi Dam project, and conducting new impact assessments.

**Aug. 29:** Leader of DKBA splinter group, Maj. Na Ma Kyar, announced dead. DKBA splinter group accuses BGF and Burma Army of arranging murder. The splinter group is now led by Col. San Aung, Brigadier Gen. Kyaw Thet, and Col. Bo Pi.

**Sept. 2-3:** DKBA troops attack BGF bases in Hlaingbwe Township.

**Sept. 7-8:** BGF moves into area between Yinbaing (BGF-held) and Wah Klu Lu mountain (DKBA-held), and DKBA and BGF clash near Yinbaing Bridge, close to the eastern bank of the Salween.

**Sept. 9:** BGF and Burma Army artillery advance on DKBA position on Wah Klu Lu mountain.

**Sept. 10:** Around 130 trucks relocated over 2,000 civilians from villages located along the Mae Tha Waw-Myaing Gyi Ngu road to Myaing Gyi Ngu town, under the coordination of the influential Abbot U Thuzana. Government forces seal off the Yinbaing Bridge at the end of the day. BGF Unit 1014 commander Maung Chit contacts the KNLA and demands to take control of five locations in KNLA territory on the western side of the Salween, near the Hatgyi Dam site: Htoh T'Ba Wai, Klaw Tae Hta, P'Tae Hta, Yaw Ma Hta, and Mae Lah.

**Sept. 12:** KNLA 5th Brigade refuses BGF demand for three reasons: 1) the areas are controlled by troops of the KNLA, signatories to the NCA; 2) security for the BGF entering the area cannot be guaranteed due to landmines; 3) the presence of more troops will threaten and create fear among local villagers.

**Sept. 13:** KNU issues statement calling for Burma military to end its operations in Karen State, due to decreasing public faith in the peace process, and reiterates KNU commitment to the national peace process. Over 200 people have fled across the Moei River across the Thai border for safety.

**Sept. 11-18:** Armed clashes continue along the Mae Tha Waw-Myaing Gyi Ngu road, concentrating around DKBA camps between Wa Klu Lu mountain and Bhu Har Gone village.

**Sept 18:** BGF and Burma Army troops have cleared all DKBA positions and camps from the Mae Tha Waw-Myaing Gyi Ngu road, securing the Hatgyi Dam access route that would be used for transporting dam construction materials and equipment.

**Sept. 19:** BGF announces that it has complete control over the Mae Tha Waw-Myaing Gyi Ngu road. By this point, over 4,000 internally displaced people have taken shelter at the Myaing Gyi Ngu monastery.

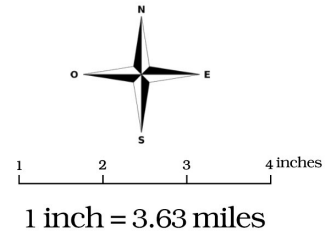
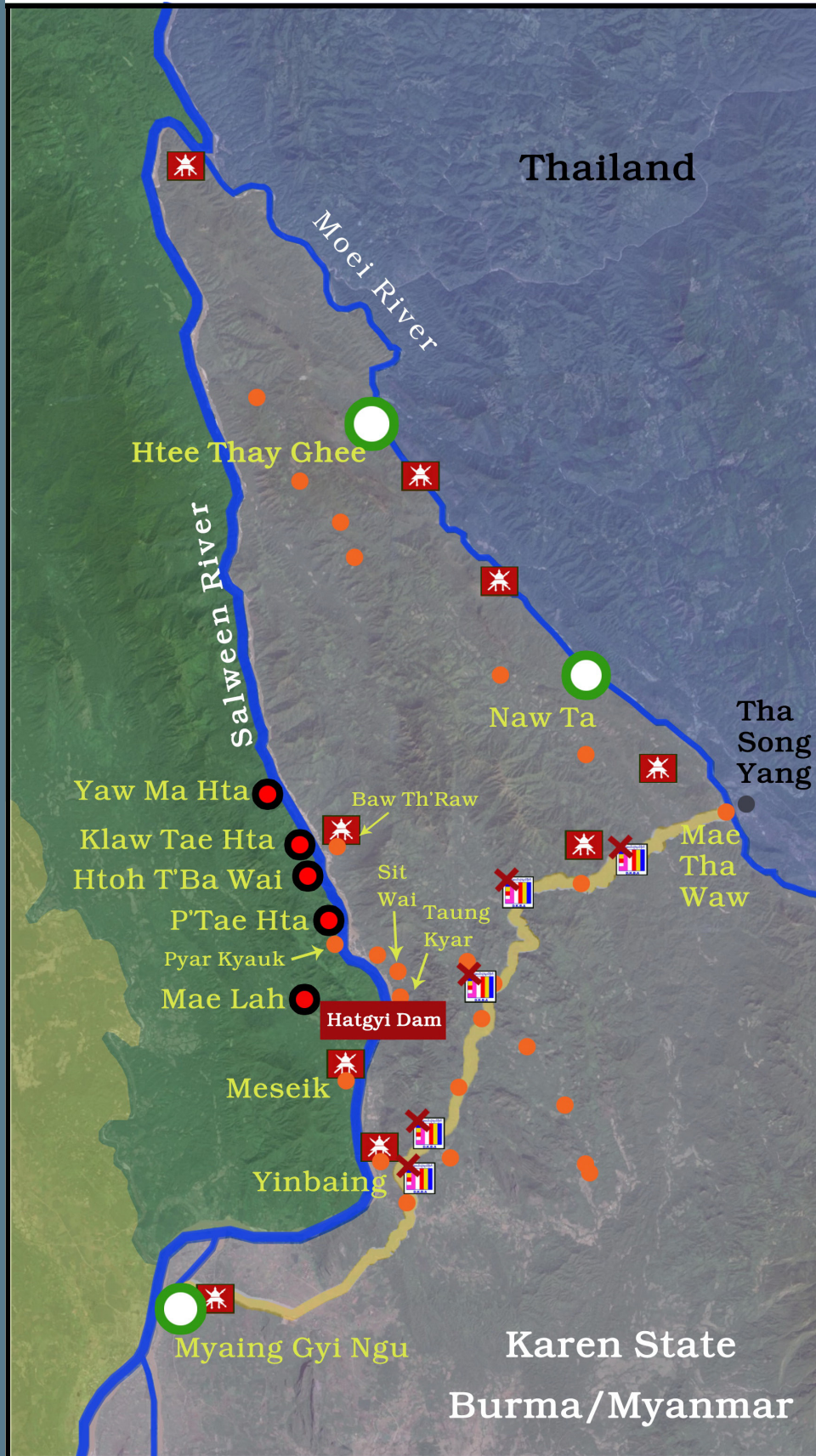
**Sept. 20:** 30 boats were organized at Meseik for the evacuation of villages located to the north of the proposed Hatgyi Dam site. An unknown number of villagers are relocated from Baw Th'Raw, Klaw Dae Hta, P'Tae Hta, Yaw Ma Hta, Pyar Kyauk, Sit Wai and Taung Kyar villages to Meseik, where they are collected in Burma Army boats and carried to Myaing Gyi Ngu.

**Sept. 21-27:** KNLA sources report BGF troop movements advancing upstream along the eastern side of the Salween River. Villager reports that BGF and Burma Army troops are stationed in Baw Th'Raw village.

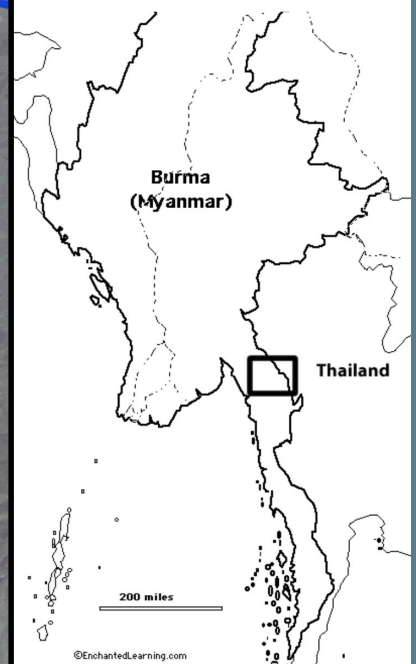


# Map of Hatgyi Dam Fighting

## September 2016



- Proposed Hatgyi Dam
- Villages Displaced by September 2016 Fighting
- Areas BGF demanded to Control; Villagers Relocated
- Temporary Shelter for IDPs
- Myaing Gyi Ngu-Mae Tha Waw Road (Access Road to Hatgyi Dam)
- River
- DKBA Camp Overrun by Government Army
- Burma Army/BGF Camp
- Bu Tho Township, Mutraw Dist. (KNLA Brigade 5 Territory)
- Bilin Township, Doo Tha Htoo Dist. (KNLA Brigade 1 Territory)
- Lu Pleh Township, Hpa-an Dist. (KNLA Brigade 7 Territory)





## The Hatgyi Dam: for Karen people, nothing but renewed conflict

Chinese and Thai dam developers have been waiting a long time to resume work on the Hatgyi Dam, which is worth an investment of 2.6 billion USD. The project developers Sinohydro, a Chinese state-owned enterprise, and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand International (EGATI), a Thai state-owned enterprise, had previously signed a series of Memorandums of Understanding with the military regime's government before 2008, without the knowledge or consent of local communities that would be affected by the dam project.

Over 85 percent of the Hatgyi Dam's generated capacity is marked for export to Thailand. In August 2016, a Thai newspaper reported that EGATI's President, Watchara Hemratchatanan, was engaged in talks over new impact assessments for a water diversion scheme that would see "surplus" water from the Hatgyi Dam channeled to the Bhumibol Dam in Tak Province, Thailand.

Tensions surrounding the Hatgyi Dam between the KNU/KNLA and the Burma Army have remained high, with Burma Army and BGF camps in the Hatgyi Dam area being reinforced periodically in the years following the 2012 ceasefire. These actions clearly reflect a lack of commitment on the part of the Burma military to the national peacebuilding process. Economic development and growth that requires violence against ethnic people, and the marginalization of their voices and lives cannot be the way forward for a democratic Burma.



### Recommendations:

- The Burma Army and its Border Guard Forces should **respect the historic peace talks and halt military offensives** in Karen State, and work with the KNU/KNLA with other armed groups through the Joint Monitoring Committee to constructively address the conflict.
- The Burma Army and its Border Guard Forces should allow the **free transportation of humanitarian aid and relief supplies to IDPs**.
- The Government of the Union of Myanmar, the Burma Army and the Border Guard Force should **end all military operations in Karen State and other ethnic areas** in keeping with the NLD-led government's pledge to establish *a genuine federal democratic union based on the principles of freedom, equal rights and self-determination*.
- The Government of the Union of Myanmar should call for a **moratorium on all large-scale development projects**, including the Hatgyi Dam, in Karen State and other ethnic areas in support of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement and internal peace.
- The Government of the Union of Myanmar should **respect and protect the human rights of all people living in the Union**, including those internally displaced as the result of armed conflict and large-scale development.
- The Government of the Union of Myanmar should systematically support the right of all IDPs displaced by the current fighting to **voluntary return** to their homes in safety and with dignity.
- The Government of Thailand **should not force refugees back** across the border while conflict is still active.
- The **Hatgyi project developers should end their involvement in the dam** as the Burma Army's militarization of project sites has occurred in contravention of Union level ceasefire agreements and a number of UN Guiding Principles, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.
- All **relevant project information** for the Hatgyi Dam, and the other Salween dams, **must be publicly disclosed** to strengthen the formal and inclusive participation of affected communities and civil society organizations, to enforce transparent projects and balanced development.