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Karenni Civil Society Network

P.O. Box - 100, Mae Hong Son, 58000, Thailand
Phone: 08 2196 2258, E-mail:kcsn2010@gmail.com

KCSN briefer on the situation in Karenni State after the February 1 military coup in Burma

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Summary

This briefing paper summarizes the escalation of conflict in Karenni State and Pekhon township of southern Shan State during the past month, due to the brutal crackdown by the State Administrative Council (SAC) on unarmed civilians protesting against the February 1 military coup.

On May 7, the Karenni People's Defence Force (KPDF) was formed, which began fighting back against the SAC on May 21. Since then, fighting has taken place almost every day, mainly in Loikaw, Demawso, and Pekhon townships, but also in Pruso, Pasaung and Bawlake.

SAC has launched airstrikes and fired heavy artillery at civilian areas, destroying homes and churches. Civilians have been arrested, tortured and killed, some shot on sight by snipers. SAC has been deploying its 18 existing battalions, numbering about 2,000 troops, in Karenni State, and has also brought in a further estimated 600 troop reinforcements from elite infantry divisions 55 and 66.

The deliberate attacks on civilians have caused an estimated 100,000 people to become internally displaced – one fourth of the total population of Karenni State and Pekhon township. The majority have been displaced in Demawso, Pekhon and Loikaw townships, but displacement has taken place in all seven townships in Karenni State. Most IDPs are sheltering in makeshift jungle camps.

The SAC Eastern Commander persuaded the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (the alliance between KPDF and some local ethnic armed groups) to announce a ceasefire on June 15, but SAC troops have continued firing artillery into civilian areas, and carrying out clearance operations in villages around Demawso, which has sparked renewed fighting with KNDF. The ceasefire is therefore already effectively defunct.

The IDPs are in urgent need of assistance, due to lack of shelter during the heavy rains, and shortage of clean water, which is causing outbreaks of diarrhea. Two children have already died of disease. However, in blatant violation of international humanitarian law, the SAC has been blocking aid to the IDPs from within and outside Karenni State, and has arrested and tortured

those trying to deliver aid. They have destroyed and set fire to humanitarian supplies, and have shot dead IDPs trying to collect food.

KCSN is calling urgently on the international community to provide cross-border aid to the IDPs, to impose a global arms embargo, and to impose political and economic sanctions on the SAC to stop its attacks on civilians and to enable the establishment of a genuine federal democratic union.

KCSN also urges the UN to intervene immediately as a third party to solve the crisis in Karenni and the whole of Burma resulting from the military coup.

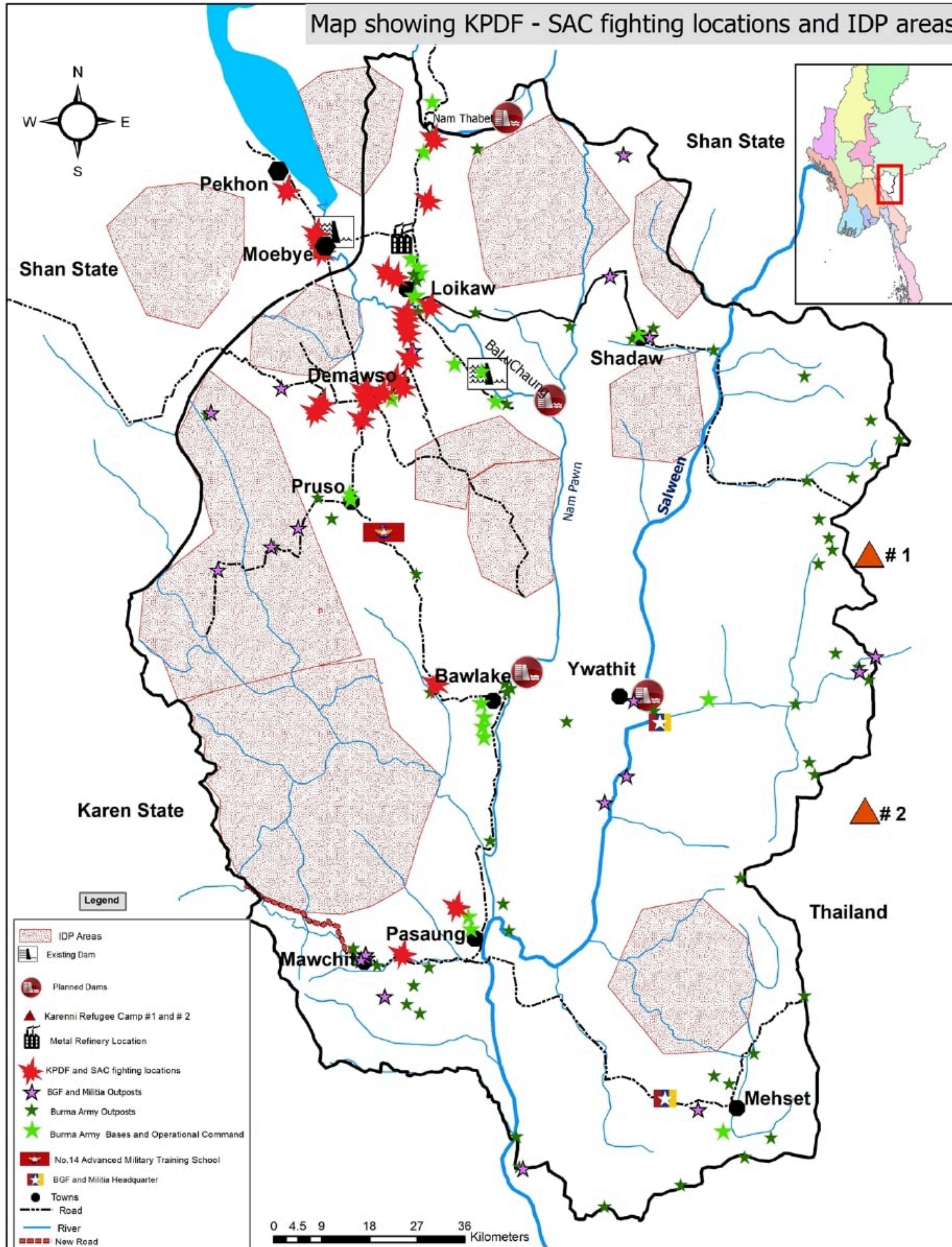
Introduction

On February 1, 2021, Commander-in-Chief General Min Aung Hlaing illegally seized state power in Burma, and the next day announced the formation of the State Administrative Council (SAC), with himself as Chairman, activating full military rule again in Burma. Since then, people opposing military rule have been staging peaceful protests in respective villages and towns in the whole country of Burma. The SAC troops and police have used rubber bullets and real ammunition, including by snipers, to crack down on the peaceful protestors, in violation of international law.

In Karenni State, youth have led protests against the military coup in every township. Karenni youth have also led protests in Pekhon township of southern Shan State. Even after the military repeatedly shot at protestors, the demonstrations continued. The military has also unlawfully arrested and imprisoned the peaceful protectors. Therefore, on May 7, Karenni people who could no longer tolerate the SAC's unjust and illegal actions formed the Karenni People Defense Force (KPDF), and on May 21 began fighting back against the SAC. Since then, clashes have been taking place every day.

On May 31, there was heavy fighting between KPDF and SAC in Demawso, where artillery shells were launched from the bases of Loikaw Artillery Battalion No. 365 and Demawso Artillery Battalion No. 360. In the evening, there were air strikes using two helicopters and two jet fighters, which dropped bombs on Demawso town. Due to these fierce attacks on civilian areas, tens of thousands of IDPs both from villages and towns have been fleeing from the fighting, and have been taking refuge in many hiding places in Karenni State and Pekhon township.

Map showing KPDF - SAC fighting locations and IDP areas



1. Timeline of people's resistance

Since the start of people's demonstrations against the coup until June 18, 2021, the SAC's security forces have killed more than 64 people, over 130 have been arrested, and more than 100 injured in Karenni State and in Pekhon township.

- On May 20, a clash broke out between KNPP and SAC, because SAC crossed into a KNPP-controlled area in Theh Taung, Bawlake township. On the same day KPDF and SAC fought at Nan Peh village in Bawlake township, where KPDF seized the police station.
- On the morning of May 21, there was fighting between KPDF and SAC at Daw Ngan Kar quarter of Demawso town. KPDF seized and burned down Tu Lwe Bee Lar police station at the entrance of Demawso town at around 5 pm.
- On May 22, KPDF fought with SAC near Daw Kalite Lin and Nyaung Kone when the SAC were on the way down from Loikaw to reinforce their troops fighting in Demawso. On that day, the KPDF also seized and burned down another police station in Daw Ta We village, Pruso township.
- On May 23, KPDF seized another police station in Moby, Southern Shan State, in Pekhon township. During the fighting, 20 policemen and soldiers were killed, and four arrested alive. On the same day, fighting broke out in Pan Kan village, Mine Lone village and Wari Kau Khu village, in Loikaw township. Fighting also took place in San Pya 6-mile village in Demawso township, when the SAC entered the village and arrested villagers.
- On May 24, the Ministry of Construction office in Demawso town was burnt down. Also, police officers from Pan Kan police station in Loikaw town fled and the police station was burnt down by local people.
- On May 24, SAC launched a heavy weapon attack on Kayan Tharyar village in Loikaw Township; a Catholic church was shelled, killing four civilians and injuring eight.
- On May 24-25, fighting broke out again in Ngwe Daung village in Demawso Township. KPDF also attacked two SAC tanks which came down from Loikaw to reinforce the bases in Demawso. KPDF successfully destroyed those tanks, and KPDF lost two soldiers in the fighting. At Daw Tha Ma Nge village in Demawso township, the SAC used snipers to attack the villagers and one of the youth was killed by a sniper.

- On May 26, KPDF attacked and burned down the Tee Se Ka police station at Lwan Lin Lay town in Loikaw Township near the Shan-Karenni border area.
- On May 27, SAC launched both artillery and ground attacks in Demawso town, where St. Joseph Catholic church was hit. Also, fighting broke out between KNPP and SAC near Mawchi, in Pasawng township.
- On May 28, KPDF attacked the main Demawso police station. SAC used both artillery and ground attacks, attacking Yay Yo village, Htay Ngar Lyar quarter, and Nanataw quarter in Loikaw township. SAC burned down a villager's house in Yayyo village.
- On May 29, SAC entered an old people's home in Nanataw quarter, Loikaw township where civilians were hiding and killed a male civilian.
- On May 30, SAC announced the extension of their ceasefire throughout the country, despite the fact that battles were ongoing in Karenni State and other regions of Burma.
- On May 31, KPDF and SAC fought with each other in Kone Thar village, Demawso township. The SAC from Loikaw-based No. 365 Artillery Battalion and Demawso-based no. 360 Artillery Battalion launched many artillery shells. Many SAC soldiers were killed and injured, until finally the SAC ordered air strikes using two helicopters and two jet fighters.
- On May 31, the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) was formed, comprising the KPDF in different townships and various local armed groups.
- On June 1-2, there was ongoing tension between KNDF and SAC around Demawso Township. Even though ground battles did not occur, SAC artillery bases continued launching artillery shells at Daw Ngan Kar village, in Demawso township, causing injury to a civilian and damaging some houses.
- On June 3, the SAC brought in troop reinforcements and ammunition by warplane to Loikaw. On that day, the SAC sent 10 mortars, 2 large tanks and other small tanks from Loikaw to Demawso. Fighting occurred briefly in 6-mile village, Demawso in an area being guarded by the people. Some SAC troops were occupying a new Catholic Church in 6-mile village in Demawso. SAC used the church to counter attack the KNDF. SAC also used snipers, tanks, and artillery to attack the KNDF until 7 pm.
- On June 4, there was fighting between SAC and KNDF in Demawso. Houses at the main crossroads in Demawso town were burnt down and a civilian who was delivering food aid was shot by the military terrorists using a sniper. Also, a civilian was killed in Loikaw. Four SAC soldiers were killed and more than four injured in a battle that lasted over three hours in Pway Kone Thone quarter, Moby town, between the SAC and the Moby People Defense Force (MPDF), which are part of the KNDF. When SAC troops retreated, they arrested some IDPs sheltering in a Catholic Church.

- On June 6, a clash between SAC and KNDF took place in Daw Ngan Khar and 6-mile village in Demawso township. The SAC fired heavy artillery and some houses in Daw Ngan Khar were burnt down, and the Catholic church was seriously damaged by artillery fire. The SAC used civilians as human shields, and brutally arrested the sexton from the Catholic church. A clash also occurred between SAC and KNDF in Moby. During the battle in Moby, the SAC shot and arrested civilians, used them as human shields, attacked churches, looted cash and valuables from people's houses and also burned down houses, in violation of humanitarian law.
- On June 7-8, the KNDF and SAC fought at Daw Ngan Kar, Demawso township, and at Moebye, Pekhoh township. Also, SAC troops which were on the mountain at Htu Lwee Belar village in Demawso township, launched artillery shells and used snipers to fire into villages where people lived. SAC soldiers from artillery bases in Loikaw and Demawso launched artillery attacks in Demawso and destroyed and burned down houses in some sections of Demawso town.
- On June 9, three SAC battalions with over 300 soldiers under Infantry Division 66 of SAC from Pegu Region crossed through Toungoo, Leiktho, Yardoh, and Siboo, to travel to Demawso, bringing extra supplies of rations and ammunition. They have since been actively patrolling in the western part of Demawso township.
- On June 9, SAC troops marched into Hsor Du Lar village in Demawso township and searched houses, looting and destroying property in the village. Fighting broke out near the village between SAC soldiers and KNDF.
- Also on June 9, SAC troops patrolled into an IDP camp near Patan Kho village, Demawso township, and threatened them at gunpoint, before continuing their patrol to Loi Nan Pah village. That evening they clashed with KNDF near Htee Poe Klo village, Demawso township.
- During this time, local villagers reported that SAC troops set fire to rations and medicines for the IDPs in Demawso and Pekhoh townships. They also set fire to cars which carried rice and medicine for IDPs, and killed IDPs attempting to go back to their village to collect food for their families.
- On June 11, 100 SAC soldiers patrolled into Padah Kho village, Mya Leh village tract in Demawso township and shot at village security guards in the village. The SAC then took control of the village. The SAC launched artillery shells from Padah Kho, resulting in almost all the residents of eight villages in eastern Demawso fleeing from their villages.
- On June 12, the SAC entered villages around Nan Mekhon town in Demawso township, threatening people, and arrested 6 villagers who they accused of being linked to the KNDF. They also set fire to rations provided to IDPs.

- On June 12, the SAC shot at and burned down houses in Daw Thama Nge village and Pa Daw Du village in Demawso township. Serious fighting broke out between SAC and KNDF, who were protecting the IDPs near Pa Daw Du village. Villagers fled into the jungle, and were unable to carry any rations with them. There was also heavy rain, making it difficult for the villagers to find shelter. The SAC burned down and destroyed one KNPP building in Daw Thama Nge village.
- On June 15, the SAC Eastern Commander, who was in Loikaw, asked ethnic armed groups including the Kayan New Land Party (KNLP), Karenni Nationalities People's Liberation Front (KNPLF), Karenni National Solidarity Organization (KNSO), Kayaw Ni, and religious leaders to talk with the KPDP to stop fighting. He gave the reason that they were concerned about the IDPs and wanted to let them return to their homes. Later that day, following negotiation between these armed groups and religious leaders, the KNDF declared a temporary ceasefire, while the SAC made no statement about a ceasefire.
- Despite the ceasefire agreement, on June 16, at 8 pm, the SAC started launching artillery shells around the 6-mile quarter of Demawso town.
- On June 17, locals found four unidentified decomposed dead bodies at Ngwe Taung quarter high school campus, Demawso town. On the same day, SAC expanded their clearance operations into eastern Demawso township, entering Htee Po Klo and surrounding villages in Htee Po Klo village tract, which sparked fighting with KNDF, in which one villager was killed.
- It is clear that the SAC's ceasefire offer to the KNDF was just a tactic to trick them into lowering their defences, while continuing clearance operations to crush the KPDP and seize back control of key strategic areas. If the SAC really wanted a ceasefire, they should withdraw all troop reinforcements brought in from Shan State and Pegu Division, but these troops all still remain in Karenni State. The SAC's ongoing offensives will continue to lead to fighting, and IDPs will still dare not return home.

2. SAC troop build-up

In Karenni State, SAC has 21 existing battalions numbering about 2,000 men. These include eleven battalions under its Loikaw-based Regional Operations Command (IB 54, 72, 134, 135 and LIB 337, 428, 429, 430, 530, 531); three battalions under Pekhoh-based Military Operations Command 7 (IB 102, 250, 261 and LIB 421, 422, 427); three artillery battalions (No. 360 in Demawso township and No. 356, 362 in Loikaw township); and two BGF battalions. There are also several hundred troops at the No. 14 advanced military training school in Pruso township, set up on lands confiscated from farmers in Marchrawshay village and Lawja village in 2012.

In March 2021, three battalions, numbering about 300 soldiers, from Infantry Division (ID) 55 based in Kalaw, Shan State, were deployed to Pasawng, southern Karenni State, along the Karen State border, as reinforcements for the ongoing SAC offensive against the KNU in Mutraw District.

On Jun 8-9, 2021, a further three battalions (around 300 soldiers) under ID 66, based in Pegu, were sent as further reinforcements to Karenni State.

This large-scale military build-up by the SAC military terrorists, their deliberate attacks on civilians and IDPs, and destruction of humanitarian aid for the IDPs, show clearly their genocidal intent against the Karenni people.



SAC burning of IDP rations and medicine on 12/6/2021 near Pekhoh town

3. Mass displacement

The Burma Army has been carrying out a Four Cuts policy in Karenni State since 1996, aiming to crush ethnic armed resistance by cutting off their access to information, food, transport and funds. In 1996-1997, about 40,000 people from over 200 villages mainly in Shadaw township, were forcibly relocated from rural areas to towns. They lost their homes, and could no longer practice their traditional livelihoods and customs. Many fled to Thailand as refugees.

The SAC is now using similar tactics in Karenni State, targeting civilians to crush the KPDF. The SAC is deliberately firing artillery into villages and towns, targeting churches, temples and schools, and shooting civilians on sight. This is causing entire communities to flee in terror, abandoning their homes and property to seek shelter in the jungle.

The highest levels of displacement have occurred in Loikaw, Demawso and Moebye, where the most intense fighting has taken place. However, even in towns and villages where fighting has not taken place, thousands of people are still worried about the danger of being shelled from SAC artillery bases, and have fled to the jungle to avoid the risk of possible attack.

According to data collected by KSCN, since mid-May, about 100,000 people have been displaced in Karenni State and in Pekhon township of Shan State. The current population of Karenni State is about 300,000¹, and the population of Pekhon is about 100,000². Therefore, about one fourth of the population of these areas has become internally displaced.



Karenni IDPs in Demawso township

Estimated numbers of IDPs (early June 2021)				
No.	Township	No. of makeshift IDP camps	Estimated Population	Remark
1.	Loikaw township	9	13,061	Fled fighting
2.	Demawso township	91	55,265	Fled fighting
3.	Pruso township	9	2,729	Fled fighting
4.	Pasawng township		4,000	Fled fighting
5.	Pekhon township	15	30,000	Fled fighting
6.	Shadaw township		729	Fled in fear of fighting
7.	Mae Set township		1,000	Fled in fear of fighting
8.	Bawlake township		300	Fled fighting
	Total		107,084	

Note: IDPs either fled to makeshift jungle camps, to hiding places near their villages, or to stay with relatives in other locations.

¹ The 2014 Myanmar Census lists the Kayah State population as 282,968 people

² The 2014 Myanmar Census lists the Pekhon township population as 107,141 people

3. IDP aid blocked by SAC

Most of the support for IDPs is coming from individuals, social groups and religious groups. At present, in order to process the assistance systematically, these donor groups have formed a team called the Kayah Humanitarian Response Team inside Karenni State. At the Thai-Burma border, they have set up the Coordination Team for Emergency Relief (Karenni) or CTER to coordinate the donations and support.

Donation teams or individuals travelling to IDP camps have been arrested, shot, and even killed by SAC. Two young IDP boys who returned to Demawso to collect rations were killed by SAC on May 26. U Sai Lin Lin Oo, who represented NLD in Bawlake township in the 2020 election, and two female friends were detained and tortured by SAC when they were on the way from Loikaw to Demawso to transport rations for IDPs on May 26. Until now, there has been no news of the condition of these three detainees.

The SAC has set up checkpoints along main roads to block the transport of food and other supplies needed for IDPs. SAC has also prohibited trucks from other cities from bringing supplies for the IDPs.

The price of basic commodities including staple foods such as rice has increased dramatically and some products are difficult to find due to the increased difficulty in transportation between townships in Karenni State.

In Pasaung township, Bawlake township and Mae Set township, local people have said that the price of rice has increased from 30,000 kyat per small sack (45 kgs) up to 90,000 or even 150,000 kyat. An egg which usually costs 50 kyat now costs 500 kyat. In some places, even if you have money, there is no produce available to buy.

Since SAC cut the electricity and internet, the IDPs and people in Karenni State have faced a lot of difficulty in many areas. Many Karenni people have fled to makeshift IDP camps or to their relatives' villages to find safer shelter. The IDPs in the jungle are facing shortages of water for drinking and cooking, as the heavy monsoon rain has made water sources muddy and unclean. The IDPs are now facing outbreaks of diarrhoea from lack of sanitation and lack of health care.

Since the fighting between SAC and KPDF started, Two children including a six-day-old baby have died of disease.

On June 4, 2021, the SAC chairmen of Loikaw, Demawso and Pruso townships sent a statement to all village and section leaders in their areas. The statement was in the name of the new Kayah State SAC chairman, U Khin Maung Oo (a former Air Force officer, and former MP of the military-backed Union Solidarity Development Party, who was the Chief Minister of Kayah State under U Thein Sein's government).

The statement blamed the KPDF for receiving training from ethnic armed groups, and for violent killing of police and soldiers, destruction of public roads and bridges, threatening the security of local citizens and "destroying peace" in the nation. It said the SAC would protect themselves against the KPDF and that civilians should seek safe shelter.

In fact, it is the SAC which has destroyed the roads and bridges, used people as human shields, and destroyed public buildings. It is the KPDF which is protecting their villages' security. Even though SAC suggested that people should find safe shelter, there is no safe place for anyone in the conflict areas. Even when people hid or sheltered in churches and retirement homes, the SAC shot at and broke into these buildings and attacked civilians hiding there. It can clearly be seen that there is no safe place for people in Karenni State.



Destruction after heavy shelling and burning by SAC in Demawso

Conclusion

For decades, the Burmese military junta has been oppressing and imposing their hegemonic rule over the Karenni people. This has led the Karenni people to take up arms and fight against them. The regime has bought numerous modern weapons and ammunition from foreign countries and fought against our resistance fighters, calling them rebels, insurgents and terrorists.

There have been numerous large-scale uprisings in central Burma, such as the 1998 students' demonstrations and the 2007 Saffron Revolution, when the junta killed thousands of young people and monks who were peacefully protesting against them

Similar violence is now happening in Karenni State after the coup on 1 February 2021. Due to the arbitrary killing, arrest and torture of innocent civilians, most youth have taken up whatever arms they could find and fought against the SAC and its lackeys to protect civilians from harm.

Similar to the saying “When the rat can’t be caught then the rice barn must be burned down”, the SAC and its lackeys have been targeting civilians continuously when they couldn’t crush the KNDF, resulting in tens of thousands of IDPs now suffering extreme hardship throughout Karenni State.

The Karenni Civil Society Network (KCSN) is gravely concerned about the current situation, and makes the following recommendations:

Recommendations

To the State Administrative Council:

1. To stop waging war and committing atrocities against the people of Karenni State and the rest of Burma, and pull all troops back to barracks.
2. To stop blocking humanitarian aid, and allow local and foreign agencies to provide humanitarian aid to IDPs.
3. To step down from power and allow the establishment of a genuine federal democratic union, under a new constitution.

To International Humanitarian Organizations:

1. To provide humanitarian aid for IDPs through cross-border channels by coordinating with ethnic leaders.
2. To demand that the military regime freely allows humanitarian assistance to IDPs.
3. To stop any support that will benefit the military regime.
4. To suspend all support to the defunct Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement peace process.

To International Governments:

We call for increased pressure to stop the regime from targeting and killing innocent people, and to enable a genuine federal democratic union to be established in Burma:

1. There must be a global arms embargo on the military regime
2. Political and economic sanctions must be imposed on the military regime
3. To solve the crisis in Karenni and the whole of Burma resulting from the military coup, the UN should immediately intervene as a third party.

Contact persons:

Khu Ko Reh Tel: +668 2196 2258

Ruby Tel: +666 3184 2980

Email: kcsn2010@gmail.com