

SHELLING OUT PUNISHMENT ACROSS MUTRAW

Besieged regime troops step up retaliatory shelling and persecution of civilians in northern Karen State



Summary

Since June 2021, Burma Army troops have intensified shelling and persecution of civilians in Mutraw (Hpapun) District of northern Karen State, in retaliation for increased KNU guerrilla attacks, which are blocking the regime's supply routes and eroding their pockets of control in this mountainous border area.

Most of the shelling has taken place in southern Mutraw, along the main access road from Kamamaung on the Salween River to Hpapun town, where the regime's bases are centred. Shelling was heaviest in September, with dozens of shells fired nearly every day. Shells were fired indiscriminately into villages and fields, causing civilian injuries and damage to property, but failing to hit any military targets.

Unable to retaliate directly against their guerrilla assailants, regime troops have increasingly targeted villagers for collective punishment: looting and destroying property, arbitrarily arresting men and women, and using them as porters and human shields.

The regime's shelling and terror tactics have caused new displacement in southern Mutraw, bringing IDP totals to over 82,000 in the district – almost the entire rural population. Most of the IDPs remain sheltering in the jungle, not daring return home in case of renewed airstrikes after the rains. Unable to plant their rice-fields this year, they are in urgent need of food aid.

About KPSN

Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN) is the largest network of Karen civil society organizations in Burma/Myanmar. KPSN member organizations have facilitated humanitarian support for vulnerable conflict-affected Karen communities, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugees for decades. KPSN works to empower local Karen communities, raise awareness of the peace process, document human rights issues, and facilitate advocacy for a sustainable and equitable peace in Karen areas of Burma.



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November 2021

Yet the regime's areas of control are shrinking. KNU blockades and attacks have forced the Burma Army to abandon eleven of their camps in Mutraw since the coup. Morale is low and dozens of the regime's troops have recently deserted. Deserters interviewed by KPSN say most troops want to leave the army, and are no longer obeying orders.

At this critical time, with resistance mounting across the country, KPSN urges the international community to stand with the people of Burma, and cut off all diplomatic and economic support for the illegitimate coup regime. KPSN also urges foreign donors to immediately scale up cross-border humanitarian aid to IDPs in Karen State and other conflict-affected areas of Burma.

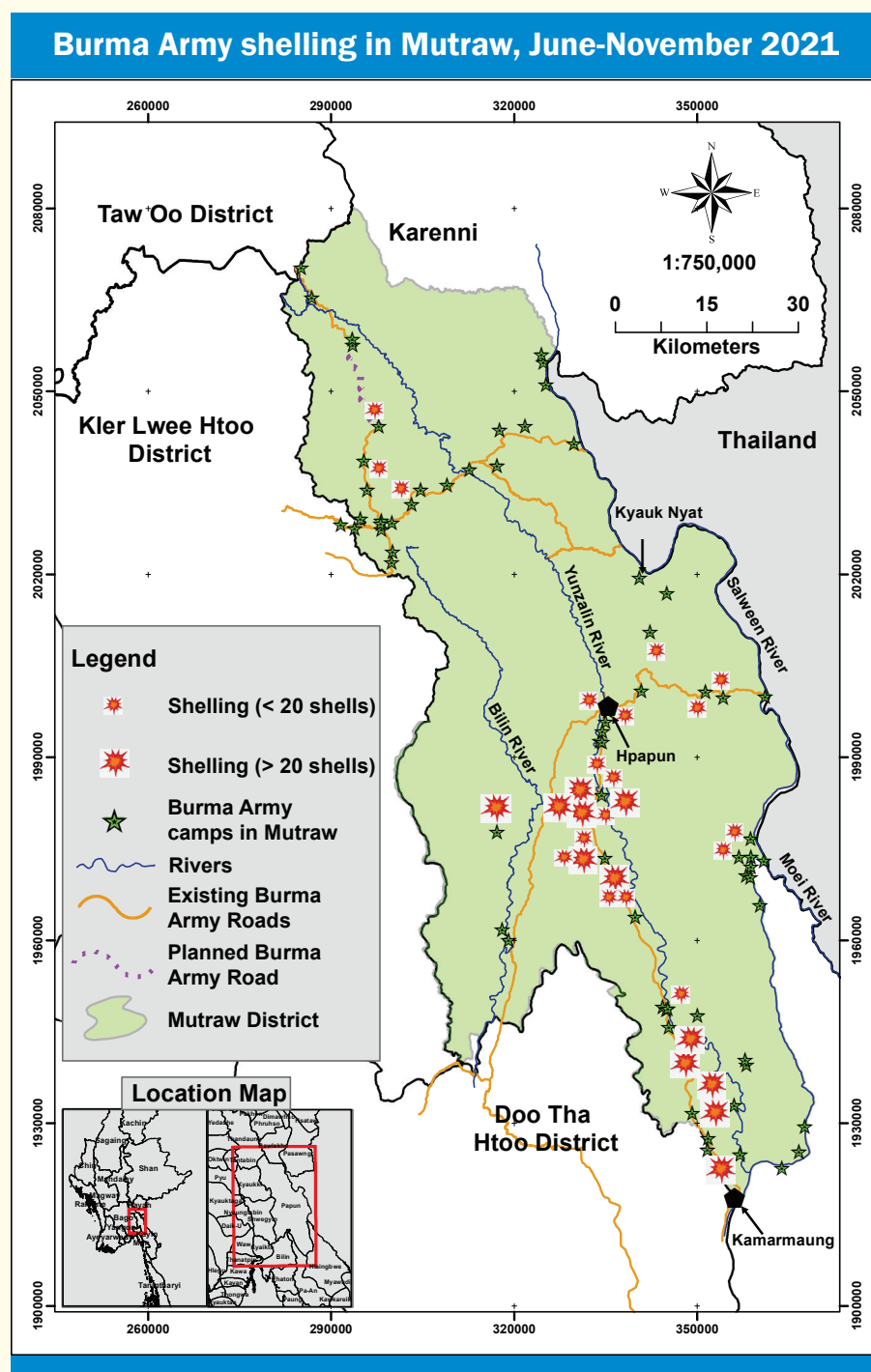
Burma Army steps up shelling in response to increased KNU guerrilla attacks

In KPSN's May 2021 briefer "Terror from the Skies", we provided a background of the Burma Army's decades-long attempts to crush the KNU in Mutraw District. Even after the KNU's 2012 ceasefire, the Burma Army set up new bases in Mutraw, and started building new access roads for quick deployment of troops and military supplies. In 2020, the Burma Army stepped up

artillery attacks, causing the Karen National Liberation Army to issue an ultimatum on December 1, 2020, for the Burma Army to withdraw all its bases from KNU-controlled areas and dismantle all camps set up since the NCA by the end of 2020. When the ultimatum was ignored, the KNU tightened its blockade of access routes into Mutraw, and in March 2021, after the military coup, began attacking and capturing Burma Army camps. The Burma Army retaliated not only with renewed shelling, but with airstrikes – the first in the area for over 25 years. This caused mass displacement of over 70,000 villagers, mostly into the jungle. Thousands fled across the Salween River to Thailand, but were pushed back within days by the Thai authorities.

The regime's fierce air and ground assaults only galvanized the KNU to step up guerrilla attacks against Burma Army bases and supply lines in Mutraw. Since June, the KNU has mainly targeted the main access road leading from Kamamaung in the south to Hpapun town, where the regime's bases are centred.

In an attempt to deter the KNU attacks, the Burma Army has fired hundreds of artillery shells and sprayed gunfire from its bases into surrounding civilian areas. Shells landed in villages and surrounding farmlands, damaging houses, property and livestock, and injuring at least eight villagers, including a monk. Gunfire also killed one villager. However, the shelling failed to hit any KNU military targets.



Burma Army shelling incidents in Mutraw

No	Date	No. of shells
1	4 Jun 21	4
2	6 Jun 21	4
3	8 Jun 21	4
4	9 Jun 21	3
5	10 Jun 21	4
6	11 Jun 21	2
7	19 Jun 21	30
8	20 Jul 21	10
9	27 Jul 21	15
10	29 Jul 21	10
11	11 Aug 21	8
12	12 Aug 21	18
13	16 Aug 21	6
14	20 Aug 21	30
15	27 Aug 21	3
16	28 Aug 21	13
17	3 Sep 21	30
18	5 Sep 21	38
19	6 Sep 21	1
20	7 Sep 21	150
21	9 Sep 21	10
22	10 Sep 21	7
23	11 Sep 21	5
24	12 Sep 21	35
25	13 Sep 21	5
26	14 Sep 21	5
27	17 Sep 21	12
28	20 Sep 21	1
29	21 Sep 21	40
30	26 Sep 21	25
31	27 Sep 21	13
32	28 Sep 21	1
33	30 Sep 21	35
34	3 Oct 21	40
35	4 Oct 21	32
36	7 Oct 21	1
37	8 Oct 21	10
38	15 Oct 21	6
39	25 Oct 21	3
40	26 Oct 21	15
41	9 Nov 21	50
42	12 Nov 21	9
43	13 Nov 21	3
44	14 Nov 21	11
45	17 Nov 21	8
46	20 Nov 21	5
		770

Increased Burma Army looting and vandalizing of villagers' property

Since June 2021, KPSN has documented numerous incidents of looting across Mutraw by Burma Army troops, mainly of villagers' livestock and food supplies, but also clothes, tools, phones, solar panels and cash.

One likely factor for the frequent looting is food shortages caused by the KNU blockade of supply lines. In a well-publicized incident on October 12, 2021, twelve Burma Army soldiers from LIB 404, based at Kyauk Nyat on the Salween river, looted food from a Thai boat transporting goods along the river. Kyauk Nyat is one of the last remaining military outposts on Mutraw's northeast river border and the troops there had apparently run out of rice rations. The troops fired shots to force the boat to stop, and demanded rice. As the boat was not carrying rice, the troops instead looted chickens, vegetables and dried noodles.

However, another factor is clearly retaliation for losses inflicted by the KNU, as Burma Army troops have not only looted, but also deliberately vandalized and destroyed villagers' property. For example, after suffering heavy casualties in early September during clashes around Mae Wai, on the main supply route to Hpapun town, the regime troops looted and vandalized all the villagers' property in Khaw Poe Khee, Mae Wai tract.

A woman from Khaw Poe Khee interviewed by KPSN, who had fled during the fighting, described the damage she found when she returned home a month later. *"Things were scattered all over the house. There were holes made in some pots and some were thrown to different places. They took all my rice and cooking oil. After cooking and eating in the house, they defecated in the pots and plates. They used our blankets, mosquito nets and clothes for cleaning, then threw them in the pond and mud."*

Arbitrary arrest, torture, use of human shields

Another form of collective punishment used by the Burma Army troops has been arbitrary arrest and torture of villagers, and use of men and women as human shields.

On August 12, troops from LIB 407 based at Ma Htaw, on the main road south of Hpapun, arrested three male villagers from Ma Htaw, aged 25, 34 and 45, and beat them with guns. On August 19, troops from LIB 341 and LIB 401, entered Ter Kee Koh village, northeast of Hpapun, and arrested three elderly male villagers, aged 42, 56 and 65, who were on their way to their farms. They were kicked and hit in the head, and then forced to porter and serve as human shields for the troops.



Villagers' property ransacked by the Burma Army in Mae Khaw Poe Kee and Ka Pay Kee village, Mae Wai tract, Dwe Lo, Mutraw District during 3-7 September 2021

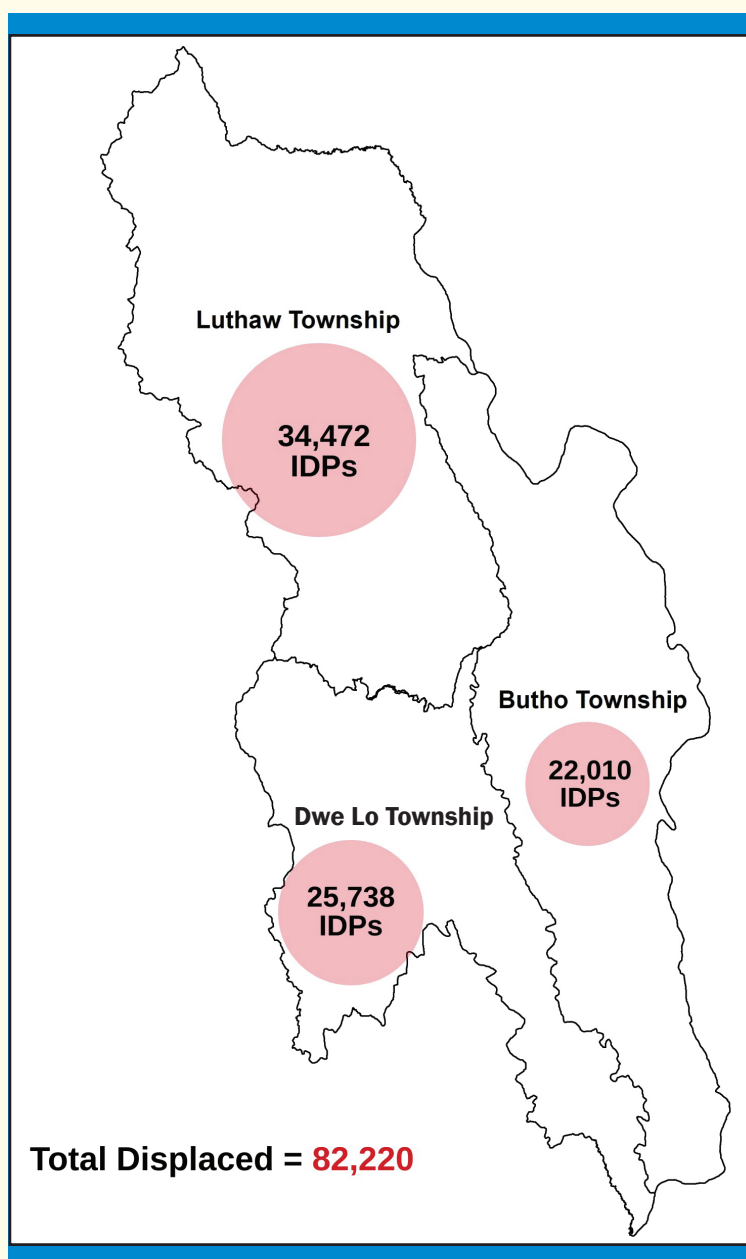
KPSN interviewed a 67-year-old woman from Wa Way Lay in southern Mutraw, who had been arrested with 6 other villagers and forced to accompany Burma Army troops as a human shield in September. On the way, there was a gunfight with the KNU and she was shot and seriously injured in her right foot. Fortunately, she was taken to a local Karen clinic, and her wound is now healing.

Displacement spreads to southwest Mutraw

In May 2021, KPSN reported that 70,738 villagers in Mutraw had been displaced by Burma Army ground and air attacks. Since then, the regime's renewed shelling and other terror tactics against civilians have caused fresh displacement, mainly in Dwe Lo township in southern Mutraw.

The total number of IDPs in Mutraw has now increased to 82,220, comprising almost the entire rural population of the district.

Township	Village tract	IDP population
Lu Thaw	Baw Thay Htar	1,459
	Yeh Mu Plaw	3,641
	Pla Koh	2,583
	Saw Mu Plaw	969
	Tay Mu Der	2,368
	Ler Mu Plaw	1,367
	Naw Yoh Hta	6,276
	Kay Puu	4,660
	Kaw Lu Der	3,104
	Pay Kay	4,600
	Ka Law Htar	3,445
sub-total		34,472
Bu Tho	Mae Nu	1,531
	Mae Kyo	2,293
	Bu Arr Darr	4,421
	Kor Pu	6,508
	Parr Heh	5,690
	Mae Kuh	1,567
sub-total		22,010
Dwe Lo	Ma Htaw	3,476
	Mae Thu	2,713
	Mae Wai	2,873
	Khu Thu Htar	1,058
	Ma Lay ler	84
	Htee Tha Blut Hta	6,070
	Ka Deh De	6,715
	Nar Koh Khee	2,749
sub-total		25,738
OVERALL TOTAL		82,220



Children hiding in bunkers to protect themselves from artillery attacks by the Burma Army.



Livestock, including buffalos, that were injured and killed from attacks by the BGF-1013

Most of the IDPs are sheltering in the jungle. Adult family members sometimes return to look after their homes and tend their farms, but almost all women, children and elderly remain in hiding, not daring to return because of ongoing Burma Army shelling and abuses. They also fear renewed airstrikes after the end of the rainy season, as there have been frequent flyovers by regime aircraft and drones.

Most of the IDPs have been unable to plant their rice fields this year, and are therefore in urgent need of rice. While some aid has been provided cross-border, it has not been sufficient to address the increasing food needs.

Capture/ abandonment of Burma Army camps

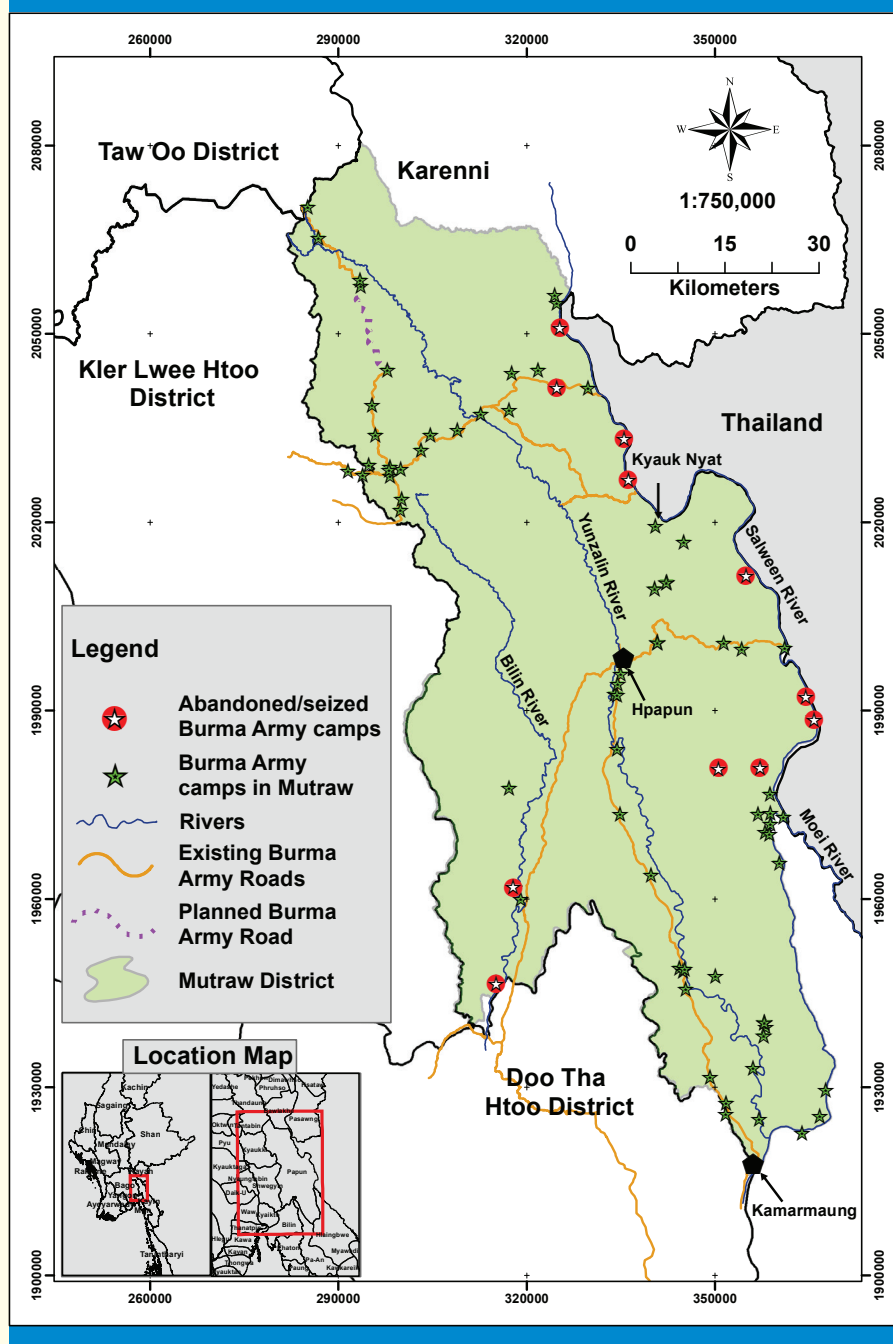
At the start of 2021, before the coup, there were 81 Burma Army camps in Mutraw. 16 of these had been set up since the KNU's 2012 ceasefire agreement. Since the coup, the escalated KNU guerrilla attacks and blockade of supply lines have led to the capture or abandonment of eleven Burma Army camps.

Most of the seized or abandoned camps are in eastern Mutraw, along the Salween River, which forms the border with Thailand. The loss of these border outposts is a significant strategic setback for the Burma Army, as the Salween river is a key transport and supply route.



An abandoned Burma Army base at Kay Kaw.

Burma Army camps abandoned/captured in Mutraw since the coup on February 1, 2021



No.	Date	Location	Township	Abandoned or captured
1	Feb 7, 2021	Paw He Gyo	Bu Tho	Abandoned
2	Feb 16, 2021	Gyaw Poe Hta	Lu Thaw	Abandoned
3	Mar 27, 2021	Thee Mu Hta	Bu Tho	Captured
4	April 1, 2021	Kay Kaw	Dwe Lo	Abandoned
5	April 1, 2021	War Mu	Dwe Lo	Abandoned
6	April 27, 2021	Mae Rah Hta	Bu Tho	Captured
7	May 5, 2021	Hpa Khae Gyo	Bu Tho	Abandoned
8	April 5, 2021	Mae Paw Mu Hta	Bu Tho	Abandoned
9	May 5, 2021	Moe Moo Gyo	Bu Tho	Abandoned
10	May 5, 2021	U Thu Hta	Bu Tho	Abandoned
11	June 1, 2021	Ree Kyar Hta	Lu Thaw	Abandoned

Burma Army desertions

“Everyone wants to run away.” - Burma Army deserter from LIB 403, interviewed in October 2021

The supply blockages and stepped-up attacks by the Karen forces appear to have significantly demoralized the regime’s troops. There have been 28 desertions to the KNU in Mutraw alone since the coup, from 16 different battalions.

KPSN interviewed a 16-year-old former child soldier, who had deserted from LIB 403 after serving in the army for three years. LIB 403 is based in Dawei, under Military Operations Command 8, but was deployed to Mutraw in 2020 as reinforcement. He said that commanders are so worried at the number of desertions that they have imposed new restrictions preventing troops from leaving the camps with weapons, unless on duty, and have withheld salary payments. This has further demoralized the troops, who are no longer obeying orders.

“The Tatmadaw structure has collapsed,” said the deserter.

Burma Army desertions in Mutraw Feb-Oct 2021	
Battalion Number	No. & rank of deserters
IB 97	1 private
IB 264	4 privates
IB 282	1 first lieutenant
LIB 20	4 privates
LIB 337	1 private
LIB 340	1 private
LIB 341	1 private
LIB 349	2 privates, 1 corporal
LIB 401	4 privates
LIB 402	1 private
LIB 403	2 privates
LIB 404	1 private
LIB 407	1 private
BGF 1011	1 sergeant
BGF 1019	1 private
BGF 1022	1 private



The Burma Army scattered rice belonging to villagers on the ground in Mae Khaw Poe Kee and Ka Pay Kee villages, Mae Wai tract, Dwe Lo, Mutraw District during 3-7 September, 2021



A villager’s hut is damaged from artillery shells fired by the Burma Army at Mae Kaw Loh village.



Saw Hpar Ke, an injured Karen villager, is seen with wounds to his head following attacks by the BGF-1013.



A woman sewing family clothes in her house damaged by Burma Army artillery shells