

Dreaming of Home, Hoping for Peace

Protracted Displacement in Southeast Myanmar



KHRG

Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

**Dreaming of Home, Hoping for Peace:
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Front cover photo: IDP family in front of their shelter, Myaing Gyi Ngu.

Back cover photo: View of one of the IDP camps in Myaing Gyi Ngu.

All photos in this report were taken during fieldwork in November 2018 and are the property of KHRG.

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I. Introduction

Executive Summary

War, violence and persecution have uprooted record numbers of men, women and children worldwide. At the start of 2018, an unprecedented 68.5 million people around the world were displaced from their homes.¹ In Myanmar, decades of ethnic conflict, political repression and systematic human rights violations have led hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes to makeshift hideaways in the jungle, more established IDP sites, or refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

According to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, internally displaced persons (IDPs) are “persons or groups of persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalised violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized border.”² The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) estimates that 635,000 people are displaced due to conflict and violence in Myanmar.³ However, accurate data is hard to obtain for Myanmar. Because of long-standing conflict, many communities live in a state of protracted, cyclical displacement, leaving their homes and fleeing into the jungle when fighting occurs, but periodically returning to their villages to harvest their crops or find food.

In Southeast Myanmar, despite the 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), ethnic communities continue to face the effects of violent conflict, heavy militarisation, and extensive landmine contamination. Large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the Asian Highway and the Hatgyi Dam, have also contributed to rising tensions and violence between armed actors. An increase in land confiscations has devastated rural communities, resulting in displacement and a loss of livelihoods.

To highlight the impacts of protracted displacement in Southeast Myanmar, the Karen Human Rights Group has chosen to analyse the situation in Myaing Gyi Ngu in this report. This IDP site is home to 5,610 people who have been displaced for over two years. Unable to return home because of militarisation and landmines, hundreds of families struggle to make ends meet. A decline in humanitarian assistance is concerning, especially since IDPs do not have opportunities to work to support themselves or their families. Many of them have put themselves in great danger, crossing into landmine-contaminated areas to scavenge for food or work on their plantations. The IDPs interviewed for this report articulated an overwhelming desire to return to their villages and live in peace. Continuing tensions between armed actors and the push to construct the Hatgyi Dam threaten to impede their return and cause further displacement.

Through this report, KHRG hopes to amplify the concerns of IDPs, whose voices should be taken into account by the Myanmar government, the Karen National Union (KNU), and humanitarian aid providers. The needs and perspectives of conflict-affected populations must be addressed in Myanmar’s ongoing peace process. Increased humanitarian assistance is necessary to meet the needs of the most vulnerable communities in Myanmar, where the government has failed to provide protection and support.

¹ Norwegian Refugee Council (2019), [“2019 will be another year of crises”](#).

² United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (June 2001), [“Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement”](#).

³ Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (December 2017), [“Myanmar Country Information”](#).

Methodology

In November 2018, KHRG conducted interviews with internally displaced persons and camp administrators in and around Myaing Gyi Ngu. The interviews were conducted at three locations within the Myaing Gyi Ngu area: Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin, the largest IDP site in the area; and Mar Lar Yu and Mya Pan Wut Mone, two smaller IDP sites. Access to the Myaing Gyi Ngu area was facilitated by the IDP camp committee from Myaing Gyi Ngu.

Altogether, KHRG interviewed 56 IDPs: 42 men and 14 women. Interviews were conducted in Burmese, as well as S'gaw and Pwo Karen languages. All participants were informed of the purpose of the interviews and provided consent to be featured in this report. The names and identifying details of interviewees have been withheld for security reasons. In certain cases, village names have been censored using single digit letters beginning from A---. The code names do not correspond to the actual names of the villages or to coding used by KHRG in previous reports.

Informal interviews were also conducted with a number of humanitarian aid providers during the analysis phase of this report. In addition to the data collected in the field, KHRG consulted and analysed 38 reports received from Myaing Gyi Ngu and the surrounding areas to gain information about the political and security context in Hpa-an District, and to analyse longer-term factors that contributed to internal displacement.

Terms and Abbreviations

IDP – Internally Displaced Person

KNU – Karen National Union

KNLA – Karen National Liberation Army

NCA – Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

BGF – Border Guard Force

DKBA splinter – Democratic Karen Buddhist Army splinter group

EAO – Ethnic Armed Organisation

II. Hpa-an District: An epicentre for conflict in Southeast Myanmar

Despite the signing of the NCA, Hpa-an District has remained a particularly tense and heavily militarised region. The Tatmadaw continues to build military infrastructure, and increased troop movements in areas under KNU control have led to several skirmishes over the last few years. The multiplicity of armed actors fuels local conflict, as each group vies for power or control of these territories.

2016: Fleeing for their Lives

In August 2016, the Tatmadaw and BGFs #1011, #1012 and #1018 began increasing troops in the area.⁴ This ultimately resulted in heavy fighting between the Tatmadaw/BGF and the DKBA splinter group along a set of new secondary roads close to the Hatgyi Dam project site.⁵ These clashes occurred because the government wanted to consolidate control over the Hatgyi Dam site, and because of local level disputes over the DKBA splinter's taxation activities.⁶

This round of clashes changed the power dynamics in the area. Prior to September 2016, the DKBA splinter faction had five bases and multiple checkpoints on the road built by the monk U Thuzana from Myaing Gyi Ngu to the border town of Meh Th'Waw. Following the skirmishes, the Tatmadaw and BGFs took control of the whole road, giving them a logistical advantage in the area. This road will likely be used as a supply route for the Hatgyi Dam construction.

On September 10th 2016, the monk U Thuzana arranged more than 200 cars to transport around 5,000 people from villages around Meh Th'Waw to Myaing Gyi Ngu ahead of the fighting.⁷ Many people did not have enough time to prepare and could not bring any of their belongings because they were told to leave while they were farming their plantations.⁸ While it is not clear exactly what motivated the monk to do so, many of

Tatmadaw

The Myanmar military is the most powerful armed actor in the country. It has played an important political role since the 1962 military coup. Although the country has made significant steps toward civilian rule, the military retains a strong hold on the government.

BGF

The Border Guard Force battalions of the Tatmadaw were established in 2010. They are mostly composed of former soldiers from ethnic armed groups that have agreed to join the military. BGFs 1011, 1012 and 1018 are present in Hpa-an District.

KNLA

The KNU and its armed wing, the KNLA, have been in conflict with the government since 1949. Although the KNU was significantly weakened following the fall of its headquarters in 1995, it still wields power across much of Southeast Myanmar. The KNU has signed the NCA, but tensions with the government remain high.

DKBA splinter group

In 1994, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) split from the KNLA over religious considerations. In 2010, the majority of DKBA troops transformed into BGFs, but one faction refused and changed its name to Democratic Karen Benevolent Army in 2012. In 2015, the DKBA splinter split from this faction. It is active in Hpapun and Hpa-an districts, and it has not signed the NCA.

⁴ Karen News (September 2016), "[Karen State Fighting Escalates](#)".

⁵ The Asia Foundation (December 2016), "[Ceasefires, Governance and Development: the Karen National Union in Times of Change](#)".

⁶ The Asia Foundation (December 2016), "[Ceasefires, Governance and Development: the Karen National Union in Times of Change](#)".

⁷ Karen Human Rights Group (April 2017), "[Hpa-an Short Update: Hlaingbwe Township, March to October 2016](#)".

⁸ Karen Human Rights Group (December 2016), "[Recent fighting between newly-reformed DKBA and joint forces of BGF and Tatmadaw soldiers led more than six thousand Karen villagers to flee in Hpa-an District, September 2016](#)".

these villagers voiced fears to KHRG about violence around their homes, and relief to get away from it.

The Hatgyi Dam: A catalyst for violence in the region

The proposed construction of the Hatgyi Dam, on the Salween River bordering Hpapun and Hpa-an districts, is a factor catalysing violence in the area, as different armed actors vie for control of the site. This has resulted in displacement, the laying of landmines and widespread human rights abuses.⁹ One of seven hydropower dams planned on the Salween River,¹⁰ the Dam is being funded by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), China's Sinohydro Corporation and Myanmar's Ministry of Electric Power and International Group of Entrepreneurs (IGE), and is expected to cost over 1 billion USD.¹¹

Military clashes have frequently occurred near the Hatgyi dam site since the hydropower project was proposed in 1998. This has had devastating consequences on local communities, who have fled to Myaing Gyi Ngu to avoid a life of chronic displacement, violence, forced recruitment, forced military labour and other human rights violation.¹⁵ Tensions further intensified in 2015, with frequent clashes occurring between different armed actors and an increase in displacement to Myaing Gyi Ngu.

Lack of Community Consultations	Flawed Environmental Impact Assessment	Heightened Risk of Conflict
The local community has not been adequately informed or consulted. Outreach meetings have been facilitated by local BGF commanders, and materials were only available in the Burmese language. ¹²	Because of the conflict, no adequate environmental impact assessment was ever conducted. Areas under the control of EAGs were off-limits to surveyors. Two EGAT employees died from landmine injuries and artillery shelling. ¹³	Skirmishes have occurred in close proximity to the Hatgyi Dam site every year since 2012. If implemented, the Hatgyi Dam could displace 30,000 people from around 50 villages upstream of the proposed project site. ¹⁴

⁹ Frontier Myanmar (October 2018), [“Activists damn Salween plans”](#).

¹⁰ For more information, see Karen Human Rights Group (June 2018), [“Development or Destruction? The human rights impacts of hydropower development on villagers in Southeast Myanmar”](#).

¹¹ Environmental Justice Atlas, [“Hatgyi Dam, Myanmar”](#).

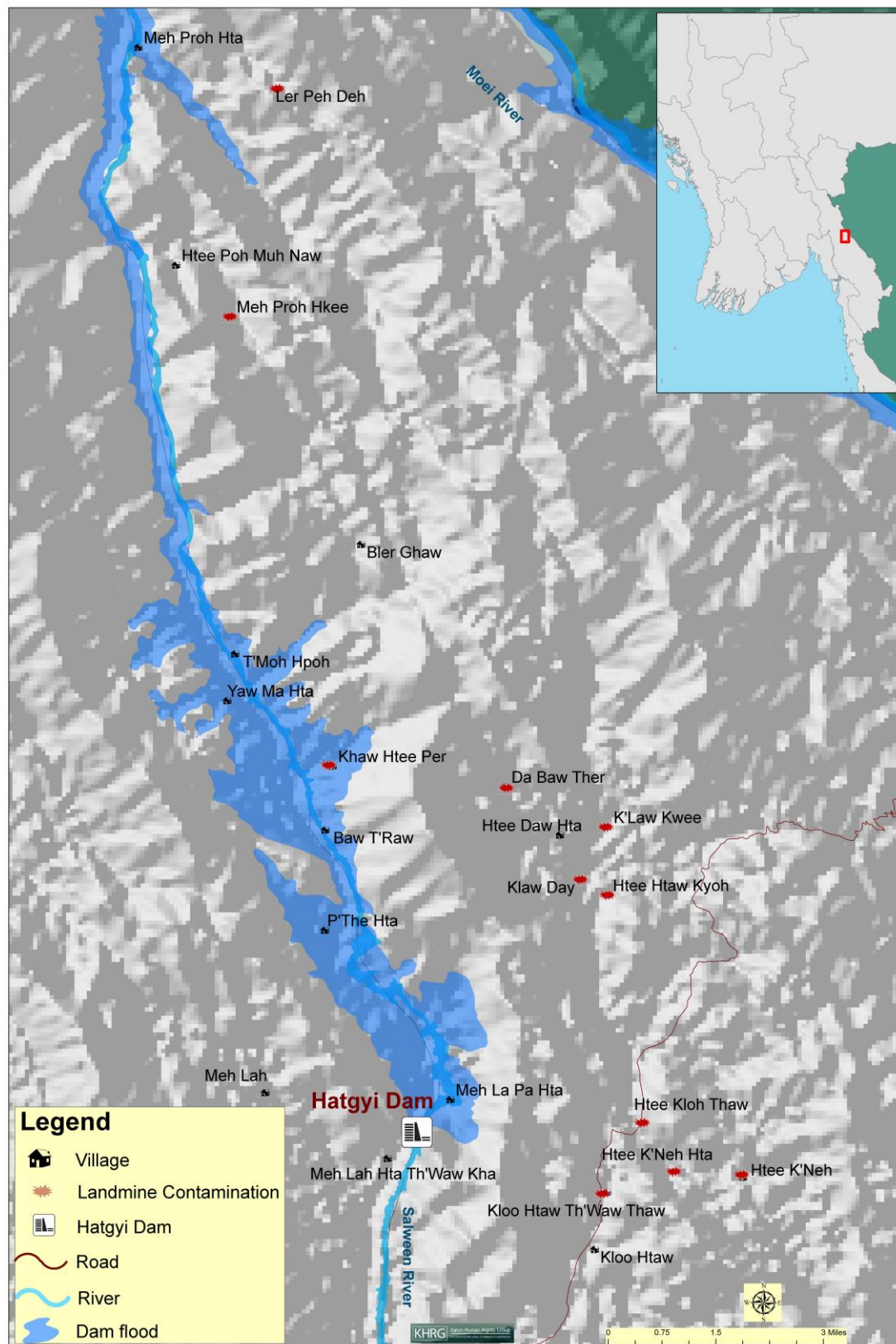
¹² Karen Human Rights Group (June 2014), [“Hatgyi Dam update and consultation concerns”](#).

¹³ Adam Simpson (February 2014), [“Energy, Governance and Security in Thailand and Myanmar \(Burma\): A Critical Approach to Environmental Politics in the South”](#).

¹⁴ The Irrawaddy (March 2018), [“Karen Villagers Protest Hatgyi Dam, Other Projects on Salween River”](#).

¹⁵ Karen Human Rights Group (September 2016), [“Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, March to May 2016”](#).

The Impacts of the Proposed Hatgyi Dam



Circumstances of Displacement

In 76% of the interviews conducted by KHRG, respondents indicated that their entire village was displaced with them. The causes of displacement were often multiple and overlapping for those in Myaing Gyi Ngu.

Active fighting

85% of the IDPs interviewed by KHRG explicitly mentioned armed conflict as their primary reason for displacement. A man from Kan Nyi Naung explained: *"We lived in our village and worked on our plantation peacefully. Unfortunately, we had to leave during the rainy season because of the fighting. Now, we live in fear. We are afraid to travel around."* Another respondent from Htee Tha Hta confirmed that he also had to flee because of the deterioration in the security situation caused by multiple skirmishes near his village: *"Fighting broke out between armed groups. We couldn't stay in our village anymore, so we came here. At first, it was between the Tatmadaw, the BGF, and the DKBA [splinter]. Later on, the KNLA also got involved."*

Cyclical displacement is common in Southeast Myanmar, as communities struggle to handle the unpredictability that accompanies seven decades of violent conflict. A female respondent from Yaw Po explained: *"Fighting usually takes place near my village around three times per year. Whenever it happens, we have to flee. I have been fleeing since I was a child."* This was confirmed by an IDP from Kan Nyi Naung village who shared his experience with KHRG: *"Fighting also happened in the past. I fled combat many times already. The last skirmishes took place three to four years ago. We just flee, hide and return, over and over again."*

In some instances, armed actors delayed the displacement of civilians, putting them in a precarious situation. An IDP from Kan Nyi Naung told KHRG: *"The KNLA came and told us not to flee. But we were afraid to stay in the village as we have many children. We gathered together and discussed whether we should leave. Every morning, two or three households would flee. We had to flee after the Tatmadaw fired mortars at our village. If we hadn't fled, we would have died. We came here by boat, but the current was too strong. We almost sank because water got into the boat."*

Several interviewees reported to KHRG that their villages had been targeted by armed actors, as one IDP from Yaw Pow confirmed: *"Mortars were fired at our village from the hill, destroying several houses. One of them almost hit my house. No villagers got injured but we did not feel safe in our village anymore."* A similar incident was reported by a respondent from Thay Hkaw: *"Before I came to the camp, fighting broke out between the BGF and the DKBA [splinter]. Mortar shells were fired at our village, but no one got hurt."* Another IDP from Htee Tha Hta explained that his village was targeted because DKBA soldiers were living there: *"Fighting between the BGF and the DKBA broke out in my village two years ago. My sister barely escaped from a mortar shell fired by the BGF. At that time, the DKBA was based in our village. After the skirmish, both groups relocated to different places."*

Armed groups that are stationed in or near villages put civilians at risk of being injured or killed in case of skirmishes. Back in 2012, two women were killed and one man wounded following fighting between the DKBA and the BGF in the Myaing Gyi Ngu area.¹⁶ Frequent skirmishes have been a driver of displacement, as a man from Yaw Ku Hta explained:

¹⁶ Karen News (March 2012), [*"Two women killed in fighting between the DKBA and Government's militia"*](#).

“Fighting between the BGF and the DKBA [splinter] broke out in our village, so we couldn’t stay there anymore. There is a hill near the village. The DKBA lives on the top of that hill and the BGF lives in the village with us. When the fighting started, we were caught between them.” An IDP from Kan Nyi Naung also reported to KHRG that shots were fired at and from his village by the Tatmadaw and the KNLA, respectively: *“Fighting broke out in my village in the past. The KNLA opened fire at the Tatmadaw from a long distance. The Tatmadaw fought back with heavy weapons. One Tatmadaw soldier tried to use a rocket launcher in front of my house, but the weapon exploded and killed him.”*

Presence of armed actors

55% of the IDPs interviewed by KHRG mentioned that the presence of armed actors led them to flee their village. A respondent from Kan Nyi Naung said: *“We fled when we saw different armed groups entering our village with their weapons.”* Another interviewee from Thay Hkaw explained that she also fled after seeing government troops: *“I left my village because I was afraid that fighting would break out. We heard that the Tatmadaw and the BGF were sending more troops to patrol the area. We saw the soldiers, so we fled. The fighting took place after we ran away.”*

Continued fighting has contributed to a feeling of insecurity among local villagers, who tend to flee when armed actors are operating nearby to avoid being caught in the crossfire. A respondent from Yaw Po told KHRG how she was afraid that her village might be targeted by armed actors, which prompted her to run away: *“In my village, we could not use lights anymore. It could have made the armed groups suspicious that their enemies were there. They could have fired mortars at the village. Because of this, we had to move to another area.”*

Armed actors operating in Southeast Myanmar have a long history of committing human rights abuses against civilians.¹⁷ Much of Hpapun District was labelled as a ‘black area’ by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), a designation that allowed the Tatmadaw to freely shoot on sight any man, woman or child they came across with impunity.¹⁸ As a result, local people still live in fear of being subjected to human rights violations by armed actors. This situation contributes to displacement, as a respondent from A--- village explained: *“Tatmadaw soldiers were staying on my land and at my farm. I was worried that I might be blamed [by other armed groups] for that. I was also worried that I might say something that could get me in trouble. I felt in danger, so I moved here.”* An interviewee from D--- village reported having been a victim of forced labour before fleeing his village: *“When the KNLA, the BGF or the Tatmadaw came and saw us, they forced us to carry their materials.”* All of these armed actors are parties to the NCA, which explicitly forbids them from subjecting civilians to forced labour in ceasefire areas (section 9(o)).

KHRG also documented several instances of forced displacement by armed actor. An interviewee from D--- village explained how the KNLA used threats to force his entire village to leave: *“KNLA soldiers in the area told us to leave because they were worried that we would help and feed DKBA [splinter] soldiers if we continued to live there. They also said that if we did not comply, they would burn all our houses.”* A similar instance of forced displacement was reported by an IDP from C--- village: *“KNLA soldiers wanted all the villagers to go, and even though the villagers were ready to do whatever the soldiers would*

¹⁷ For more information, see Karen Human Rights Group (October 2017), [“Foundation of Fear: 25 years of villager’s voices from southeast Myanmar”](#).

¹⁸ Karen Human Rights Group (February 2009), [“Attacks, killings and the food crisis in Papun District”](#).

ask so that they could stay, they were forced to leave. Most of the women did not want to come, but there was nothing we could do."

Another incident amounting to forced displacement involving the BGF was also reported by a respondent from A--- village: *"Everyone, every household fled from the village. The commander of the BGF unit based in the village did not allow us to stay. He said that fighting would break out."* These incidents are clear violations of Section 9(c) of the NCA, which states that the Tatmadaw and the Ethnic Armed Organisations shall avoid the forcible displacement or relocation of civilian populations.

Forced Displacement: A confluence of factors

An analysis of KHRG's interviews shows that the majority of IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu were warned to leave their villages by the monk U Thuzana and his followers, who also arranged transportation to take them to the camp. In September 2016, the monk U Thuzana gathered more than 200 trucks to pick up people from nearby areas ahead of the fighting.¹⁹ An IDP from Da Baw Ther confirmed: *"The monk knew that fighting would break out, the armed groups didn't listen to him. He told us all to come and gather in Myaing Gyi Ngu. Then, he sent cars to pick up the villagers."* An interviewee from Wa Bway Tu reported the same pattern to KHRG: *"The monk went to pick us up in the morning and told us that we could not stay here anymore. We followed him and the fighting started in the evening."* Interviews with IDPs from Htee K'Neh Hta, Mae Th'Waw Mote Wa, Ler Peh Deh and Yaw Ku Hta corroborated this information. Entire villages were picked up by the monk U Thuzana's trucks prior to the outbreak of fighting. The monk U Thuzana commanded respect among armed actors, which may have facilitated the process of transporting entire villages to Myaing Gyi Ngu.

KHRG's documentation from 2016 revealed that many of the villagers who were picked up by the monk U Thuzana's trucks had to leave immediately, leaving behind most of their belongings and livestock.²⁰ This lack of preparations has undermined their ability to support themselves in the IDP sites. An interviewee from Htee Kloh Thaw shared his concerns with KHRG: *"We came here by car, so we brought the things that we could carry and left everything else. Now, the materials that we left in the village are lost. People cannot find our cows and buffaloes anymore."* The destruction of homes, property and livestock is a factor that impedes the return of IDPs, as discussed in Section IV: 'Barriers to Return'.

There were instances where the monk U Thuzana was not able to evacuate civilians before the onset of fighting. An IDP from Htee Kloh Thaw told KHRG: *"The monk himself went to pick us up. We did not face any difficulties on the way, but then the fighting started. Not all the villagers had been able to leave; some were still on the way to the camp. They just ran into the forest without anything to eat. It took them over a week to get here. Some people stayed in the forest for months. They were afraid of travelling so we had to pick them up."*

When villagers ultimately arrived at the Myaing Gyi Ngu area, whether by the monk's transport or on their own, they were able to settle in a space somewhat removed from the conflict, but still lacking in basic human rights.

¹⁹ Karen Human Rights Group (December 2016), [*"Recent fighting between newly-reformed DKBA and joint forces of BGF and Tatmadaw soldiers led more than six thousand Karen villagers to flee in Hpa-an District, September 2016"*](#).

²⁰ Karen Human Rights Group (December 2016), [*"Recent fighting between newly-reformed DKBA and joint forces of BGF and Tatmadaw soldiers led more than six thousand Karen villagers to flee in Hpa-an District, September 2016"*](#).

III. Protracted Displacement in Myaing Gyi Ngu: A humanitarian assessment

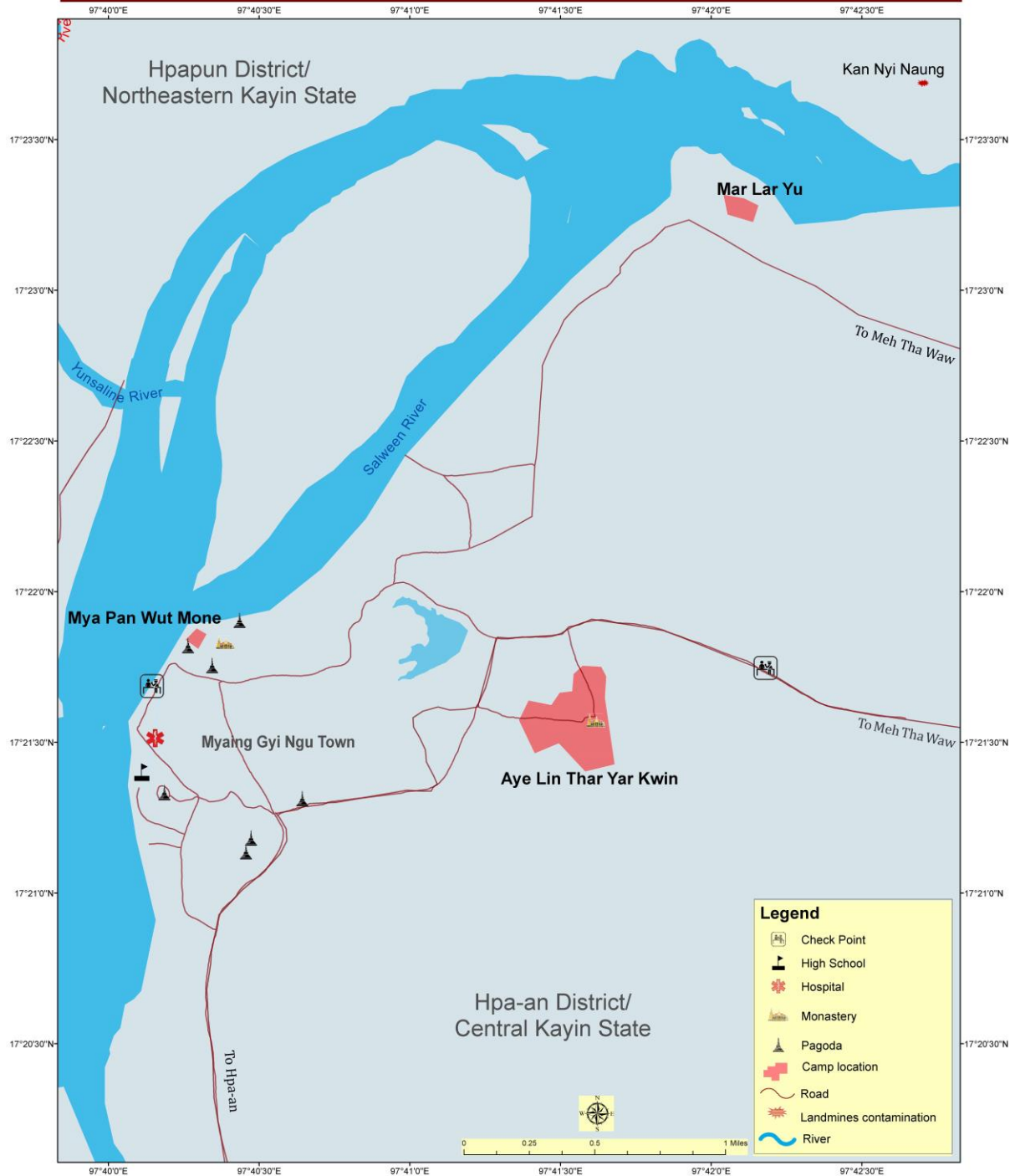
KHRG interviewed IDPs living in three sites within the Myaing Gyi Ngu area: Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin, Mar Lar Yu and Mya Pan Wut Mone. This section analyses the difficulties these IDPs face in their day-to-day lives. It uses the standards set forth in the Sphere Handbook, one of the most widely accepted guidelines for humanitarian response.²¹

Key Issues of Concern

1. Sanitation remains a significant problem in Myaing Gyi Ngu. IDPs do not have access to filtered drinking water, reliable soap distribution, or adequate shower or toilet facilities. The lack of an adequate waste management system puts them at increased risk of developing serious diseases.
2. IDPs do not have access to a balanced diet. Rations are insufficient to meet their daily needs. IDPs have been scavenging for vegetables in landmine-contaminated areas to supplement their diets.
3. IDPs lack protection from the elements because they do not have access to housing materials to repair their dilapidated dwellings, which in many cases are lacking walls or a roof strong enough to withstand the elements.
4. The vast majority of IDPs cannot earn an income in the camp because of the lack of available farmland and job opportunities. As a result, they struggle to access basic services and meet the needs of their families.
5. Healthcare costs and a lack of specialised care in the camp are challenges for IDPs.
6. Most displaced children cannot continue their schooling beyond primary school because their parents cannot afford to cover the cost of tuition and transportation.
7. IDPs, including children, have worked for the monks to 'make merit', under conditions that could amount to forced labour.

²¹ Sphere Association (2018), *"The Sphere Handbook – Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response"*.

Internal Displacement in Myaing Gyi Ngu



A. Water Supply, Sanitation, and Hygiene

Water scarcity: An Ongoing Issue

According to the Sphere Standards, IDPs should have “equitable and affordable access to safe water to meet their drinking and domestic needs”, depending on the climate of the displacement site.²²

In Mar Lar Yu and Mya Pan Wut Mone, access to water is fairly stable. Both IDP sites are located near a river and have wells that can provide water to the IDP population.

In Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin, the hot season is problematic. Some of the wells dry up, leaving IDPs in a situation of water scarcity. One male IDP living there said: *“In April, many of the wells get dry. In the hot season, there is only one well left that we can draw water from. So many people come to draw water from this well. I think that about 400 or 500 households depend on this well for water.”* A female IDP living there said *“it is hot season so we cannot access water nearby. Sometimes, we do not have enough water to take a bath.”* She continued: *“When the well dries up, we rely on the Salween River for water. We go to nearby villages and carry the water back to our houses. Some IDPs can afford to pay someone to bring them water by car. You have to pay 1,000 kyat [0.66 USD] to receive ten gallons of water. I have many family members, so I cannot afford to pay this fee.”* Water shortages are a threat to the health of IDPs. They can have profound negative impacts on the preparation of food, sanitation and hygiene in IDP sites.²³

Water: unfit to drink

According to the Sphere Standards, water should be “of sufficient quality for drinking and cooking, and for personal and domestic hygiene, without causing a risk to health.” IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu do not have access to clean water. Although some IDPs are aware that boiling water would purify it, they do not have a habit of doing so.

Some IDPs improvise filtration techniques to try to purify the water themselves. A male IDP from Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained: *“Sometimes, too many people draw water from the well with a bucket. So many people do this, so the water gets dirty in the well. However, we still drink the water after straining it through a piece of cloth.”* An IDP in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin said that he once saw a camp administrator purify water with a tablet, but that normally, *“we just use a strainer to purify the water.”*

²² Sphere Association (2018), *The Sphere Handbook – Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response*, 107.

²³ UNHCR (1992), [*Water Manual for Refugee Situations*](#).



An IDP walks home carrying a big bottle of water to cook dinner. [Photo: KHRG]

IDPs were concerned about the quality of water during the rainy season, particularly after flooding. A female IDP from Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin said: *“After the flooding, people worry that the water from the well will get dirty and contaminated. So we use a tablet and we boil water to purify it.”*

In all sites, IDPs reported that they have, at times, relied on the Salween River for water, which is a health risk. They do so in part because there are no

nearby wells. A male IDP from Mar Lar Yu explained: *“Although there are some wells here, they are far. This is why we get water from the Salween River and filter it for drinking.”* This is problematic because IDPs in Mar Lar Yu have also reported defecating in the Salween River and throwing used diapers, female sanitary products and other waste in the river. Water contaminated by faecal bacteria can pose serious health hazards to displaced communities, by spreading waterborne diseases, such as hepatitis, diarrhoea, dysentery, cholera, typhoid fever, and skin diseases.

Inadequate Sanitation

“We have to walk very far to go to the toilet. Some people can’t hold it in, so they just let it go halfway to the bathroom. Sometimes, when you reach the toilet, there is no water there to clean yourself and flush. Then, you need to rush to find water. It would be so much easier if we had toilets close to our homes.” (IDP, Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin)

According to the Sphere Standards, displaced people should have “adequate, appropriate and acceptable toilets to allow rapid, safe and secure access at all times.” There should be at least one toilet for every 20 people, located a maximum of 50 meters away from IDP homes. In Myaing Gyi Ngu, IDPs do not have access to a safe and clean toilet, which is particularly problematic considering that most of them have been displaced for over two years. The UNHCR Emergency Handbook stresses that in situations of protracted displacement such as this one, a latrine should be provided to each family.²⁴

²⁴ UNHCR (2015), ‘Camp Planning Standards (planned settlements)’, in [“Handbook for Emergencies”](#).

Unhygienic and unsafe communal toilets



A makeshift toilet used by IDPs in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin. [Photo: KHRG]

Of those IDPs interviewed by KHRG, 20% have access to a household toilet. The rest of the IDP population is dependent on communal toilets. 38% of IDPs in these sites said that communal toilets were too far from their homes. As one male IDP in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained: *"The toilets are about 30 minutes away from our house by foot. This makes it difficult for children to go to use the toilets at night."*

There is no lighting in the communal toilets, and for those who must walk to communal toilets, no lighting on the way

there. This makes many women and children feel unsafe. A woman in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin also said: *"the toilets are far from our houses, so we do not feel safe to go out alone at night time. It would be easier if we had access to a toilet closer to our house."* To address this issue, female IDPs have resorted to going to the toilet in groups at night. Another explained: *"Even though it is far to go to the communal toilet, at least there is a door that you can close. When we are afraid to go to the toilet alone at night, we will ask someone to go with us. By going together, we help each other."*

Half of the IDPs interviewed by KHRG reported that the communal toilets do not have water and buckets available to flush waste. Many IDPs complained about the cleanliness of communal toilets. A male IDP living in Mya Pan Wut Mone said: *"We go to the toilets in the school compound, instead of the communal toilets which are disgusting. In the school toilets, we need to carry water in a bucket to flush, but there is soap available."* A male IDP living in Mar Lar Yu complained: *"During the rainy season, there are so many leeches in and around the communal toilets. If we have to stay in the IDP camp longer, we will need a toilet for each family. The communal toilets are not clean for the community."* Respondents also reported that soap and cleaning materials were not commonly available, increasing the risk of communicable diseases in Myaing Gyi Ngu. *"We used to have buckets to flush the toilet, but after the flooding [during the last rainy season], all of the cleaning supplies were lost."* The unhygienic conditions of some communal toilets can encourage some IDPs to practice open defecation instead. As a woman from Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin said: *"Some people do not use the communal toilets, which can cause the spread of illnesses in the community. When some people arrived to the camps and saw the toilets, they were afraid of the toilets and worried about the conditions."*

Mar Lar Yu: No designated place for human waste

In Mar Lar Yu, 73% of IDPs reported that they did not have access to toilets. These IDPs have no choice but to use the nearby forest or the Salween River. This is problematic because it significantly increases the chances of faecal bacteria getting into the water

supply. According to the UNHCR, faecal contamination of water supply systems is the most serious threat to water safety in situations of protracted displacement.²⁵

Rationing soap: a health hazard in situations of protracted displacement

IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu do not have easy access to designated showers, which poses safety risks for women. According to the UNHCR Minimum Standards for planning camps, there should be “separate, well drained, with designated shower areas for men and women.”²⁶ In Myaing Gyi Ngu, people typically bathe either in the Salween River or next to the wells in their IDP sites. A female IDP in Mar Lar Yu said: *“We take a bath by the well beside the house. Other people go to take a bath and wash their clothes in the river.”*



IDPs in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin bathe around this well.
[Photo: KHRG]

Roughly 45% of IDPs said that they have no soap or insufficient soap to meet the needs of their families. According to a male IDP in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin, it had been two months since the last soap distribution. Another male IDP there said: *“We don’t regularly get distributions of soap. The last time there was a flood, we received some soap. We are still using that soap now because we have rationed it.”* Rationing soap is a common practice in all of the IDP sites in Myaing Gyi Ngu. A female IDP in Aye

Lin Thar Yar Kwin said: *“I try to use one piece of soap for three to four months. Sometimes, there is a distribution of laundry powder, but I need to ration it. Sometimes, there is no distribution for a while, and I have no money to buy any so I just have to save it. I only use a little bit of laundry detergent to wash my children’s clothes.”* A female IDP in Mar Lar Yu told KHRG: *“We do not use anything to clean ourselves when we do not have soap. We have to take a bath with only water.”*

Several respondents mentioned that although it is possible to buy soap and laundry detergent, IDPs generally do not have the money to do so. Only two IDPs reported to KHRG that they supplement the amount of soap received by purchasing it themselves.

Waste (mis)management

According to the Sphere Standards, displacement sites should be environments free from solid waste: “solid waste should be safely contained to avoid polluting the natural, living, learning, working and communal environments.” There is no working waste management system in any of the IDP sites in Myaing Gyi Ngu.

²⁵ UNHCR (1992), [“Water Manual for Refugee Situations”](#).

²⁶ UNHCR (2015), ‘Camp Planning Standards (planned settlements)’, in [“Handbook for Emergencies”](#).



Waste accumulating on the banks of the Salween River in Mya Pan Wut Mone IDP site. [Photo: KHRG]

None of the IDPs interviewed by KHRG mentioned an organised waste collection and disposal system. In all of the IDP sites, respondents indicated that they throw their trash in the nearby forest or in the Salween River. At best, garbage is bagged at the homes of IDPs and then thrown into the nearby environs. *“We fill the rubbish bin on our own and when it is full, we throw it in the jungle.”* An IDP from Mya Pan Wut Mone explained: *“Every house has a rubbish bin.*

IDP throws the trash in the Salween River when the rubbish bag is full.” This is problematic because many IDPs depend on the Salween River for water. At worst, individual garbage is simply left on the ground, including used diapers, used sanitary pads, and human waste.

B. Food and Nutrition

“Rice. Let me tell you something. As IDPs, there are so many things that we need from the bottom of our hearts, but we do not mention them. If you can tell decision-makers for us, let them know that we would like any support. But what we need most is food. There are so many things that we need, I cannot list them out.”

(Female IDP, Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin)

Insufficient Food Assistance

According to the Sphere Standards, IDPs should “receive food assistance that ensures their survival, upholds their dignity, prevents the erosion of their assets and builds resilience.” The Myanmar government has been supplying 1,770 bags containing 50kg of rice to the IDP sites in Myaing Gyi Ngu every three months. With 5,610 people in the camp, this means that each IDP receives an average of 170 grams of rice per day. This is equivalent to 221 calories per day, less than 10% of the daily calories an adult man needs to maintain his weight. The government should ensure that the basic nutritional needs of IDPs are met. In November 2018, when KHRG visited Myaing Gyi Ngu, the camp committee was concerned that the rice rations would decrease following the death of the monk U Thuzana.

In addition to rice, IDPs receive rations of oil, onions, chilli powder, salt, yellow beans, and monosodium glutamate (MSG). The quantity that they receive of these items varies, and distributions are not consistent. The food aid they are receiving is insufficient to guarantee a balanced diet, which should be based on regular consumption of vegetables, fruit, grain, protein, and dairy products.

Without supplementary food, IDPs lack essential vitamins and other nutrients. The quantity received also varies greatly. IDPs in 56% of interviews said that there have been food

shortages that left them hungry. The Myaing Gyi Ngu camp committee is concerned that the amount of humanitarian assistance will further diminish with the death of the monk U Thuzana. In situations of protracted displacement, food insecurity can have profound repercussions on the physical and psychological health of communities.

To complement the paltry rations they receive, IDPs often leave the camp to go to the jungle or surrounding villages to find vegetables. This places them at risk because of the presence of armed actors and landmine contamination. As a male IDP living in Mar Lar Yu explained: *“Some people just go back and work on their farms. Some people just find vegetables in the forest. I think we all have to find food on our own. We eat food when we receive food aid. We have to scavenge when we do not receive food.”* IDPs should not have to place themselves in danger to find food.



IDPs growing gourd outside of their settlement in Mar Lar Yu. [Photo: KHRG]

Some IDPs have been able to purchase food to supplement the gaps in their diet: *“If you are in your village, you don’t need to buy vegetables, you forage for them. We cannot find any vegetables here. We just have to buy everything.”* This is not an option available for many IDPs because of the lack of income-generating opportunities available in Myaing Gyi Ngu. As one female IDP in Mar Lar Yu explained, *“Yes, we get to eat when we have money to buy the curries.”*

The lack of food aid affects children. According to one IDP in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin: *“We are only allowed to get rice twice a day. Children in school are allowed to get rice three times a day because they need to eat something during lunchtime. There is no other food for them, so they just eat rice for lunch.”* White rice does not have significant amounts of any nutrients and is an inadequate lunch on its own for growing children.

Lack of targeted food aid to vulnerable populations

The Sphere Handbook highlights the importance of food security assessments (“to determine the degree and extent of food insecurity, identify those most affected and define the most appropriate response”) and nutrition assessments (“to identify the type, degree and extent of undernutrition, those most at risk and the appropriate response”). Because many international humanitarian organisations have limited access to IDP sites in Myaing Gyi Ngu and local camp management do not have the required technical skills, no comprehensive assessment has been made of the 5,610 men, women, and children who have been displaced in this area. This is problematic: without a comprehensive food security assessment or nutrition assessment, humanitarian providers cannot identify populations vulnerable to undernutrition, malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies.

The protracted nature of displacement —many IDPs have been in Myaing Gyi Ngu for over two years— makes pregnant women, lactating mothers and young children particularly vulnerable to malnutrition. Interviews with Myaing Gyi Ngu IDPs have revealed that food

assistance is not targeted to the respective needs of different groups of IDPs. An issue of particular concern is the fact that food aid does not depend on the size of households. Families with more children have reported not receiving enough food assistance. As a male IDP in Mar Lar Yu said: *“Households with many family members probably do not have any food left. We still have some, but it is not enough, so we have to buy additional food ourselves. We receive rice, but no fruits or vegetables, so we need to find those ourselves.”* The Sphere Handbook states that mothers, infants and young children should “have access to timely and appropriate feeding support that minimises risks, is culturally sensitive and optimises nutrition, health and survival outcomes.” The fact that additional food and support



Food rations from the UNHCR and other donors in a makeshift kitchen in Mar Lar Yu. [Photo: KHRG]

is not provided to households with infants and young children in Myaing Gyi Ngu is worrying.

A female IDP in Mar Lar Yu said: *“How can it be enough? We received 2 to 4 bowls of rice, which only lasts for a few days. We have a big family with six children. This amount of rice lasts us only 1 or 2 days, how can it last for a month? We have a lot of children. [...] We borrow some rice from our neighbours. We have no opportunities*

to earn an income. We have to ask for help from our friends nearby.”

There are major issues with the distribution of food assistance in Myaing Gyi Ngu. Food assistance should be responsive, timely, transparent and safe, and taking into account the needs of different segments of the population.

Inequality in food aid delivery

A respondent currently living in the Mar La Yu area reported to KHRG that some IDPs had been discriminated against when it comes to food distribution. He explained: *“There is a person who is responsible for providing food to the IDPs. I told her to share the food equitably, and not to ignore the persons who live here. Some of them did not receive food. She said that she does not live in this area, which is why we receive less consideration. This is not acceptable. We do not want to see inequality in the camp. Everyone had to flee their villages, and we are now facing the same problems. If the [camp management] receives food, they should share it with the IDPs who live here. Right now, she doesn't do that. That's really bad.”* However, KHRG was not able to assess whether this situation resulted from perfectible camp management or actual discrimination.

Religious restrictions

The IDP sites in Myaing Gyi Ngu also have a particularity: the monk U Thuzana demarcated Myaing Gyi Ngu as a Buddhist zone. Meat is not allowed in Myaing Gyi Ngu. This restriction further limits the protein intake of a displaced population already lacking in nutritious food. The prohibition of meat in Myaing Gyi Ngu also raises concerns about the treatment of non-Buddhist populations. Muslim families were forcibly displaced from Myaing Gyi Ngu in the 1990s. A sign banning Muslims is prominently displayed at the entrance of Myaing Gyi Ngu town. Unfortunately, it has been difficult to assess the extent of religious discrimination beyond food restrictions during KHRG's fieldwork in Myaing Gyi Ngu.

Difficulties in preparing food



A communal kitchen in Mya Pan Wutt Moe IDP camp. [Photo: KHRG]

IDPs also reported that they could not control the preparation of food because rice was cooked in a central location for everybody in the camp. According to an IDP in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin, this can cause difficulties for families with small children or elderly people: *"We took some rice from the camp kitchen and brought it back to our house to eat. It is not comfortable to eat in the communal kitchen because we have small children. This is also a difficulty for some older people who cannot walk very well."*

In situations of protracted displacement, the needs of vulnerable groups must be taken into account for food distributions.

Furthermore, IDPs mentioned that they have trouble finding firewood, making it difficult for them to cook at home. A male IDP in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained, *"We have no problem when it comes to picking up rice. But the problem is finding firewood. Sometimes, it is difficult to get firewood for cooking."*

C. Lack of Livelihood Opportunities

Most of the IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu were previously subsistence farmers who relied on hill farming and plantations for their livelihoods. In their villages of origin, they supplemented their income by searching for vegetables in the forest and planting elephant yams and other cash crops.

Based on KHRG's findings, IDPs do not have income-generating opportunities in any of the IDP sites in Myaing Gyi Ngu. This is problematic because most IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu have been displaced for over two years, having fled their villages during the 2016 skirmishes.

Sphere Standard 7.2 outlines that "women and men should receive equal access to appropriate income-earning opportunities where income generation and employment are feasible livelihood strategies." Without farmland or the opportunity to earn an income, IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu are entirely reliant on the humanitarian aid that is distributed to them. Given that the quantity of aid has decreased, most IDPs face difficulties sustaining themselves and their families.



IDPs gathering plastic bottles to sell to earn an income.
[Photo: KHRG]

As one IDP from Mar Lar Yu said: *"the most challenging situation is the lack of opportunities to earn an income. Our living condition is so bad but we do not know what to do."* In situations of protracted displacement, dwindling humanitarian aid coupled with a lack of livelihood opportunities can lead to feelings of despair and hopelessness.

Because most IDPs are subsistence farmers, they face difficulties securing their livelihoods without their

land. *"We don't know how to work for our living and to support our families. If we are on our land, we can work as much as we can. This is not our village, so we cannot work as we like. The land belongs to other people so we cannot do hill farming or cultivate any food."*

24% of IDPs interviewed by KHRG said that they leave Myaing Gyi Ngu to work on their plantations or find day wage labour opportunities. This is concerning because of landmine contamination around Myaing Gyi Ngu, and the presence of armed actors in the area. Displaced communities should not have to risk their lives to satisfy the basic needs of their families.

In cases where IDPs can find short-term work that is safe, these opportunities are few and far between. They often fail to secure fair wages for their labour, as one male IDP in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained: *"I went back to the village to work on an elephant yam plantation [as daily worker]. So I can earn some money to buy vegetables and betel nut. I do not have any other work I can do. I only received 10,000 kyat [6.57 USD] for my work. I used this to buy food for my family, but it is already gone."* Most IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu are not so fortunate.

IDPs told KHRG that they went back to their village to work, despite the presence of landmines around their village. A camp secretary in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained:

"We do not have the confidence to return because an IDP was injured by stepping on a landmine, just a few days ago. He left the IDP site to work as a casual worker. Like the rest

of us, his family does not receive enough food to eat from humanitarian aid. Chili, oil, rice and salt are not enough for the long-term. Our children also need nutritious food. This man made a choice to work outside of the camp. Unfortunately, he stepped on a landmine and got injured.”

Declining humanitarian assistance has put an extra strain on households led by women. The camp secretary said: *“I see the struggle of widows or single mothers who have to work hard for their children. Some widows have to struggle a lot because they have small children. They are worse off than other households. A third of the households led by women are poor and do not have enough food to eat.”* The lack of income-generating opportunities renders households led by women even more vulnerable in situations of protracted displacement.

D. Inadequate Shelter

Background

It appears that most IDPs had to be sheltered by locals when they first arrived in the camp: *“At first, most IDPs stayed in someone else’s house temporarily. After we were given tarpaulins, we built our own shelter.”* Nothing indicates that the camp management provided technical assistance to help the IDPs to build their house, including to the most vulnerable groups: *“Some women with lots of small children had to ask their neighbours to build a shelter for them.”* Although several interviewees said that they initially received construction materials, it seems that they were only given items such as tarpaulins and pieces of thatch: *“We were given tarpaulins but we had to find wood or bamboos by ourselves. We mostly took driftwood from the river, and also bought some.”* The majority stated that they needed to find or buy their own materials, which created significant economic difficulties for some of them: *“I built my house myself. I bought bamboo and wood but I ran out of money. I had to borrow money and I still have to pay it back. I have a lot of debts. My children cannot help me now, and I can’t even walk anymore.”*

Shelters in the camp tend to be made out of bamboo, tarpaulins, leaves, and various other cheap materials because IDPs could not afford better construction materials: *“I could not build a good house. My house is of poor quality because I could not buy logs and bamboo. When we live here, we do not have a job so we cannot earn money.”*

In addition, several IDPs living in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin reported that the area was prone to flooding, which can damage the habitations and facilitate the development of waterborne diseases. One respondent confirmed that she had had to move several times because of that: *“Summer and rainy season are the worst seasons for us. Sometimes, we have to move because of flooding. We have to stay at someone else’s house with our small children.”* Another interviewee told KHRG that the houses were too close to each other, which is a fire hazard during the summer: *“It is extremely hot and there are no trees to protect us from the sun. If one house burns, the fire will spread to all the nearby houses.”*

Living space

Interviewees made clear that many of these habitations do not feature basic roofs and walls fit to protect their occupants from cold and wet weather, which can lead to health issues. An IDP living in Mar Lar Yu told KHRG that his hut offered little if any protection against the elements: *“Our hut has no walls. We just had to stay like this through heavy rains and strong winds. It was really cold and we were afraid of thunder.”* Another respondent staying in Mya Pan Wut Mone explained that he feared the upcoming rainy season because his house was

falling apart: *“My house is in ruins now. I will have to fix it this year, otherwise, it will be really difficult during the rainy season.”* Similar problems were reported in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin, as highlighted by a female IDP living there: *“If you look around, you can see that every house has a broken roof. Rain gets into our houses during the rainy season. It damages the floor, which can be easily broken when we step on it. However, we have to tolerate and accept the situation.”*



Makeshift shelters in Myaing Gyi Ngu. IDP families are worried that their homes might not withstand the upcoming monsoon. [Photos: KHRG]

Many of the respondents living in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin reported that their shelters required urgent repairs, as one IDP confirmed: *“I think that my house will fall apart next week because it’s already decayed. I need new logs and bamboo to build a good house.”* In some cases, houses had already fallen apart: *“My house has already collapsed. We just live inside it because there’s nothing else we can do.”* The camp management does not provide any materials to repair housing, even though one of their staff acknowledged to KHRG that it was a serious issue in Myaing Gyi Ngu. One respondent reported that this situation forces IDPs to live in dilapidated and sometimes dangerous conditions. *“In my house, the floor is broken. The kitchen is broken too so we cannot use it anymore. We would be happy if we receive support to rebuild our house because we really need it.”* The poor quality of their houses puts IDPs, and notably children, at risk of injury, as one interviewee reported: *“My [raised wooden] house is not good, but we have no choice. Sometimes our children fall through the slats on the floor while walking inside.”*

The Sphere Handbook recommends a minimum of 3.5 square metres of living space per person.²⁷ The majority of shelters in the camp seemingly do not meet this minimum standard, as an IDP currently living in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin confirmed: *“Our house is not a big house, about 100 square feet (9.3 square metres). There are nine people in my family, including my parents-in-law. We just have to make it work and live like that.”* When asked whether his house was big enough to accommodate his whole family (eight persons), an interviewee living in the same area answered in the negative: *“No, we do not have enough*

²⁷ Sphere Association (2018), *“The Sphere Handbook – Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response”*, 254.

space. We have to live in cramped conditions, it is not comfortable. We just built this small house so we could have our own space. It is about 10 feet (3 metres) wide.” Another IDP staying in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin with nine relatives in a nine-foot-long (2.75 metres) house compared his situation to that of farm animals: “We sleep like pigs. Our two mosquito nets are stretched to their limit during the night.” An IDP living in Mar Lar Yu also complained to KHRG about the lack of space in his shelter: “Our house is crowded. My family lives in a small space so it is not comfortable for us. I don’t like to live here.”



An IDP family in their crowded dwelling. [Photo: KHRG]

Many residents said that they do not have electricity at home, which poses safety problems and raises the chances of having an accident inside or around their house. A respondent living in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained that the camp used to provide electricity when he arrived, presumably from a generator, but that any IDPs with electricity were now relying on personal electricity-generating devices: “When we first

came here, we used to have electricity but now it is cut. Donors installed it and left. They did not come back to check it, maybe people here cannot manage it. Some villagers in the camp have their own personal supply.” Slightly less than a quarter of those interviewed said that they have sufficient electricity for light in their homes, and for all of these people the electricity was derived from solar panels (one person reported bringing his panel from his village, whereas the others had received them as aid).

Household items



Baby sleeping in a mosquito net. [Photo: KHRG]

Many IDPs reported that they had received necessary household items, including some combination of blankets, mosquito nets, mats, pillows and clothes. Almost everybody reported having received the first three items, whereas pillows and clothes were only received by some people. One respondent living in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin confirmed that he had received that kind of support, but emphasised that it was not enough to cover all necessities: “Sometimes we

receive clothes, blankets, notebooks for students, tarpaulins, water containers and soap. Those materials are very useful for us even though they do not cover our needs.” The Sphere Handbook recommends that IDPs should have at least two full sets of clothing, as well as one blanket and bedding set to ensure their thermal comfort and protect their health.²⁸ This does not seem to be the case in the camp.

Indeed, many people reported having received only a couple of blankets for their whole family, as a female respondent staying in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained: “We received three mosquito nets and two blankets. It is not enough because we are eight family members. We have to buy more to cover our needs.” She also suggested that the blankets were not warm enough: “Our blankets are not adequate for the cold.” An IDP in Mar Lar Yu formulated a similar complaint: “As you know, I have six family members and we received only one blanket per family”; while a respondent living in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin highlighted the need for warmer clothes and blankets to prepare for the cold season: “We have enough blankets and clothing, but the weather is getting colder. We need warmer clothes and blankets.” Most of the IDPs cannot earn income to buy additional blankets and clothing, which puts them at higher risk of developing diseases.

Security of tenure in situations of protracted displacement

The Sphere Handbook insists on the importance of ensuring the security of tenure for IDPs in both their shelter and settlement options. In practice, it means that they must be able to live in their homes without fear of forced eviction.²⁹ It appears that this minimum requirement is not met in Myaing Gyi Ngu. Indeed, one respondent living in Mar Lar Yu told KHRG that

²⁸ Sphere Association (2018), “The Sphere Handbook – Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response”, 259.

²⁹ Sphere Association (2018), “The Sphere Handbook – Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response”, 266.

local people might not allow IDPs to stay on their lands long-term: *“We can only stay here temporarily because these are not our lands. The landowners will not let us stay forever.”* Another interviewee living in Mar Lar Yu explained to KHRG that buying land in the camp was not an option due to his current financial situation: *“Currently, we stay in other people’s land. We made a shelter and stay in it. We cannot afford to build a house unless the [donors] do it for us. We were allowed [by landowners] to temporarily stay here.”* The overwhelming majority of IDPs cannot return to their villages because of landmine contamination and the tense conflict situation. Without tenure security, IDPs may feel they face an even more uncertain future.

Some IDPs in Mar Lar Yu and Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin reported that they do not yet have their own shelter, and were at the time of the interview staying inside another family’s house. This situation was usually a source of discomfort, as a respondent living in Mar Lar Yu explained: *“We want to live in our own house. We have been living on someone else’s land for two years, we don’t want to do that forever. I think I will build a house here. What I need is land. If we have land, then I can build a house for my family. This way, even if we cannot return to our village, we can stay here and find ways to work for our livelihoods.”* Another IDP in the same situation told KHRG that all he wanted was to return to his area of origin: *“I don’t have my own house because no one will build it for me. I was just allowed to live in someone else’s house temporarily. I don’t know him. I don’t feel comfortable living in another village. I want to go back to my village where I have my own house.”*

In Karen culture, land is a crucial source of identity, food, income, and shelter. Because IDPs live on lands that are owned by local people, they often feel like their lives lack purpose because they cannot farm to earn their livelihoods. As explained by a respondent living in Mar Lar Yu: *“Here I do not have a job to provide for my family. We do not own lands around here. We cannot collect bamboo and sell it so we can buy food. We want to go home and return to our land. We don’t want to stay on other people’s lands.”* Another interviewee living in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained that he had difficulties finding firewood because he does not own lands in the camp: *“During the cold season, we need firewood so we can build a fire and warm up. We cannot find it nearby because all the lands belong to local people. They scold us when we collect firewood on their lands.”* Because of the lack of tenure security, IDPs have resorted to foraging in heavily mined areas to find food and construction materials to repair their dwellings.

E. Health Provisions

Health conditions in the camp

The Sphere Handbook highlights the need for “access to healthcare and information to prevent communicable diseases.”³⁰ This is seriously lacking in all three IDP sites in Myaing Gyi Ngu. Food scarcity, cramped living conditions, difficulties accessing clean water, and inadequate sanitation and hygiene standards have serious health impacts on IDPs. Measles, malaria, fever, and diarrhoea are common in all three IDP sites.

³⁰ Sphere Association (2018), *“The Sphere Handbook – Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response”*, 312.

Difficulties accessing healthcare



Children in IDP camps are particularly vulnerable to waterborne diseases. [Photo: KHRG]

Displaced people should have access to integrated, quality healthcare that is safe and effective. According to the Sphere Standards, a minimum of 80% of the displaced population should have access to a health facility within an hour's walk.³¹ There are no health clinics located in any of the three IDP sites in Myaing Gyi Ngu. However, the Myaing Gyi Ngu hospital is situated close to two of the IDP sites: Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin and Mya Pan Wut Mone. The IDP site in Mar Lar Yu is much further away. IDPs often need to hire a

motorbike taxi to reach the Myaing Gyi Ngu hospital, incurring extra costs to access basic health services. For more serious conditions, IDPs need to travel to the hospitals in Hpa-an or Ka Ma Maung to get treatment. Although camp committee leaders sometimes assist IDPs with transportation, the distance poses an added challenge for IDPs with serious health conditions. A male IDP in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin said: *"Serious health problems are the main thing we have to overcome while we are living here. [. . .] Some people had difficulties securing the transportation they needed to go to the hospital."*

According to the Sphere Handbook, "healthcare facilities should not charge for priority healthcare."³² IDPs can access free health services and treatments at Myaing Gyi Ngu Hospital for common health issues. In the case of serious illnesses, they need to pay the cost of treatment. IDPs have also reported having to buy prescribed medications themselves. Given that IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu have very few opportunities to earn money, healthcare expenses can be a burden for families. An IDP from Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin said: *"I just worry for the health of my children. If they fall sick, I do not have money to send them to the hospital. It costs a lot to get to the hospital so they better stay healthy. We cannot afford to buy medicine for them either."*

Language barriers can pose additional problems for IDPs. Because most of the displaced population does not understand Burmese, they can face difficulties communicating with doctors.

³¹ Sphere Association (2018), *"The Sphere Handbook – Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response"*, 298-299.

³² Sphere Association (2018), *"The Sphere Handbook – Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response"*, 307.

F. Education

Difficulties accessing middle and secondary school

Although none of the IDP sites has a school, parents in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin confirmed that displaced children up to 12 years old could access primary education at the Buddhist monastery, which is located in Mya Pan Wut Mone. A respondent living in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained to KHRG that children could study there for free: *“Primary education is not a problem at the moment. Studying at the monastery does not cost anything. They also get books for free.”* IDPs were also able to enrol their children in Myaing Gyi Ngu’s government primary schools for free, as one interviewee living in Mar Lar Yu confirmed: *“The school does not cost anything. The Myanmar government supports the schools, so my child can go to school even though I do not have a job. I will be able to support my child to undertake higher studies if I have enough income. If not, I will have to accept the situation.”*

Education past Standard 4 is not free,³³ and the majority of parents said that they are worried that they will not be able to afford to enrol their children: *“Now, they are in primary school, which is free. There is no financial challenge, but there might be in the future if my children study at a higher level.”* An IDP staying in Mya Pan Wut Mone raised the same issue, and highlighted that he would not be able to support his children to finish primary school without help: *“I would like my children to be doctors, but I can’t afford to keep them in school. Alternatively, I will encourage them to study if someone can keep them in school.”* The cost of middle and high school can be a barrier for displaced children. In addition to this, it can take IDP children up to one hour on foot to reach Myaing Gyi Ngu’s high school. This situation further undermines the ability of these children to access higher education.

Some respondents complained about hidden costs and the distance between camps and school facilities, which further restrict access to education for IDPs. One mother living in Mar Lar Yu explained that she had to cover accommodation costs to allow her children to study: *“We want to see them educated and to travel to other countries. But we worry that our expectations will not come true because of financial issues. Now, my children are taking the Standard Four matriculation exam so they have to stay at someone else’s house in town. There are some costs related to that.”* Another mother in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin told KHRG that she had financial difficulties because of the costs of her children’s education: *“We faced difficulties paying the textbook fee [...]. Sometimes we have to pay for gas since our children travel by motorbike.”* One respondent from Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin even reported being asked to support the school, a common practice in Southeast Myanmar: *“Sometimes, [the children] come back and say that the teachers are asking for money to buy something. I cannot give every time, because we don’t have ways to earn money.”*

Quality of education: An ongoing issue

Many respondents pointed out factors that prevented their children from accessing high quality education. A father in Mya Pan Wut Mone reported to KHRG that, in his children’s school, the only teacher working there was not available to teach full time: *“The warehouse coordinator arranged a school for the children to study, but the teacher is only available to teach half of the day.”* Other schools had to close during the rainy season, as a father in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained: *“There was flooding during the rainy season so the school closed for quite a long time.”* A respondent in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin also told KHRG that, in at least one school, there were not enough tables to accommodate all the students: *“Chan*

³³ Most children are aged 9-10 in Standard 4.

Thar Mying school is near to the camp so many children go to study there. School teachers love them but they do not have enough tables [for the children] to study in the school."

The local schools do not teach the Karen language to displaced children, as confirmed by a respondent living in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin: *"They don't get to learn Karen language in school. They just study Burmese and Pali."*³⁴ One interviewee explained that this opportunity was provided by a senior monk on a voluntary basis and outside of school hours, presumably at the monastery: *"They have to learn it after school. Some people come back from the Myanmar government high school and go learn Karen if they want to."*

Factors keeping children out of school



Out-of-school children collecting plastic bottles to sell as a way of supplementing their family income in Mya Pan Wut Mone IDP site. [Photo: KHRG]

Some parents could not afford to send their children to school because they relied on child labour to supplement the family income. This particular point was raised by a male respondent living in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin: *"Some of my children would really like to study but what can we do? We need more people to work in order to support each other for our livelihood. I cannot work alone to support the whole family."* A female respondent also pointed out that her children could not attend school because they had to

contribute to domestic chores and do religious work for the monks: *"They used to go to school when we lived in the village. Since we came here, they have to do religious work to get merit. [...] They have to look after the house and do chores such as cooking, carrying water, washing clothes and taking care of their younger brothers."*

It appears that some displaced children have chosen not to attend school anymore, which might demonstrate a lack of awareness regarding the positive impacts of education. Perhaps more worrying, their parents do not challenge their decision even though they seem fully aware of the importance of education, as one respondent living in Mar Lar Yu confirmed: *"Most of my children only finished grade 4. I sent them [to middle school] but they don't want to study. I would try to send them even if we cannot afford it. [...] I want them to be educated, but there's nothing I can do if they don't want to study. They will just have to work on farms and be followers."* Another father from the same area explained that repeated displacement had led his children to abandon school: *"They had to move from place to place, so they don't want to go to school anymore. We have to flee every year. My children don't go to school even if I ask them to."* Protracted displacement and livelihood difficulties can have profound psychological impacts on children that can make it more difficult for them

³⁴ Pali is a scriptural language in Theravāda Buddhism.

to successfully complete their education. Special care should be taken to integrate out-of-school children, who might have gaps in their education because of cyclical displacement.

KHRG also documented two cases of children who were not able to attend school because of psychological or physical conditions. One respondent in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained that his grandchildren were dismissed from school because they were suffering from mental health problems: *“Almost all of us who came here have mental illnesses, so we do not understand much. When I first came here, we were asked to enrol our children in school. I enrolled two of my grandchildren, but the teachers told me that they were not active and not paying attention to class, so they expelled them from the school.”* Psychological conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder can have serious impacts on the mental health of displaced children, and their ability to concentrate in school. Another interviewee from the same area reported that, unlike his younger brothers, one of his children could not attend school anymore because he could not physically walk there: *“My second child is now attending grade seven, and the third one is attending grade four. The older one can’t walk.”* The school system in Myaing Gyi Ngu seems unable to accommodate the needs of displaced students who have physical disabilities or psycho-social issues. This situation is discriminatory in nature, as it prevents them from accessing education.

G. Safety and Protection



Many women and girls in Myaing Gyi Ngu are afraid of leaving their houses after dark. [Photo: KHRG]

Thuzana, in a context where it could have been perceived as disrespectful to criticise the camp management in any way. Finally, nothing indicates that the respondents were fully familiar with the concept of human rights. Therefore, their ability to assess whether their rights have been violated could be limited.

No restrictions on freedom of movement in the camp were reported, and respondents can seemingly leave the camp at will provided that they comply with checkpoint working hours and inform the BGF about the purpose and timing of their travel. Disputes between IDPs seem to be handled by camp management and local authorities, including the BGF. However, it was unclear whether a special mechanism to handle complaints of human rights abuses or discrimination is available and accessible in the camp. Although several

The present report mostly relies on information provided by IDPs. As a result, assessing to what extent the camp management takes the necessary measures to protect the rights of IDPs, as well as to prevent and tackle abuses, is difficult. Indeed, many of the interviews took place in a group setting, which might have prevented some respondents from reporting the reality of their situations. In addition, the fieldwork for this report was conducted just after the funeral of the monk U

interviewees indicated that it exists, others did not know about it. When asked to whom she would submit complaints of discrimination or mistreatment, a female IDP in Mar Lar Yu could not provide an answer: *“I wouldn’t know where to submit it because I don’t know the people here. I would not take any action.”*

The majority of interviewees did not report being concerned about security in the camp. However, several female respondents shared with KHRG their fear of walking around the camp at night, as confirmed by an IDP in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin: *“We feel safe during the day, but at night we are afraid to walk around alone. The toilets are far from our house, so we don’t feel safe going there during the night. I am afraid of being subjected to sexual violence.”* Another female interviewee there explained that, although she was not concerned for her security, she would escort other women to places where they do not feel comfortable going alone: *“We live here like a family and help each other. If young women are afraid to go to the toilets alone, we just follow them and look after them.”* KHRG did not document any case of sexual violence or violent crimes between IDPs, but one interviewee reported some theft cases.

Despite the limitations mentioned in the first paragraph, KHRG was able to document one case of torture by a BGF soldier. In addition, KHRG is concerned that some IDPs might be engaged in merit-making work that could amount to forced labour.

Abuses by armed actors

Although respondents mentioned the presence of BGF soldiers around the camp, most of them did not report having been subjected to any kind of mistreatment. However, an IDP in told KHRG that one of his relatives was severely beaten by a BGF officer. This incident happened after his relative refused to transport the BGF officer on his boat.³⁵ *“My son-in-law informed Captain Bo Win that he could not transport him that day because he had to feed his buffaloes. The next time my son-in-law crossed the river, Captain Bo Win stopped him and hit him repeatedly in the head with a hammer. His head was bleeding severely, and he was left seriously injured.”* KHRG research shows that physical abuse by BGF soldiers remains common in Southeast Myanmar, fuelled by a climate of impunity.³⁶

Forced labour

Several interviewees reported that they or other IDPs regularly worked for the monks in order to make merit. A male IDP in Mar Lar Yu explained: *“When we are in the camp, we have to do work for the monastery.”* In Buddhism, merit is a protective force that accumulates as a result of good deeds. Merit-making is, therefore, an important aspect of life for Buddhists, as merit is believed to bring good results for its holder. An IDP in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained to KHRG that she was grateful to be able to work for merit in the camp: *“We mostly work for the monastery. Sometimes we don’t have anything to do, as there are no available jobs for us. I feel happy in this religious community because, back in my village, I was not able to work for merit. Here, I can do it whenever I want. Nevertheless, we have to be concerned about our livelihoods in the camp.”*

³⁵ Armed actors commonly intimidate civilian populations into providing them transportation.

³⁶ For more information, see Karen Human Rights Group (December 2018), [“Hpapun Incident Report: A village head sustained serious injuries after being tortured by BGF #1014 in Bu Tho Township, November 2018”](#); Karen Human Rights Group (March 2018), [“Hpapun Incident Report: Violent threats and physical abuse by BGF #1013 soldier in Dwe Lo Township, March 2017”](#); Karen Human Rights Group (July 2015), [“Violent abuse and killing committed by BGF soldiers in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District, March to May 2015”](#).

KHRG found no evidence that this work was forced upon IDPs. However, some IDPs could feel like they have no choice but to engage in work for the monks who support them in the camp. A female respondent whose husband was away implied that the social pressure to volunteer was strong: *“My husband is not there to volunteer. People might gossip.”* Another IDP conveyed the same idea: *“I just follow older people. If they ask me to work, I will do it.”* In addition, IDPs might not be fully aware of what could be actually regarded as forced labour, as another female interviewee explained: *“They are very unquestioning. If you ask them to go and work, they go without complaining.”*



Some IDPs reported having to work for the monks to ‘make merit’, commonly building bridges, stupas or roads in and around the camp. [Photo: KHRG]

the bridge anymore.” In March 2018, Frontier Myanmar reported that displaced men and boys had been required to help renovate the road between the Hlaingbwe-Hpa-an junction and the Kyone Htaw waterfall; and to build a hall at the monk’s monastery for religious purposes.³⁸

Although merit-making work is sometimes rewarded with food items in the camp, this work is unpaid. An interviewee in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin indicated that she could not earn income to provide for her family, but reported to KHRG that she was engaged in unpaid construction work: *“We usually volunteer for religious events and work on the road construction. If we are asked to go to Kyauk Hsaung to carry sand and stones, we just go. There is no other work to do.”* The lack of paid work opportunities in the camp seems to fuel merit-making work. Another respondent in Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin explained that he would rather work for merit and get food than engage in income generating activities, even though it did not appear that he would receive more than the rations usually given to IDPs: *“If we are called to help others to get merit, we go. We do not receive anything. We leave in the morning and come back in the evening. Some people only got rice after they came back because the curries are already gone. I was offered to work to earn some income once, but I refused because I was busy. When we do things for merit, we can have food to eat.”*

Back in 2013, KHRG documented that the monk U Thuzana had forced villagers from at least five village tracts, including children, women, and elderly people, to build a bridge in Bu Tho Township. The work was unpaid and presented as a donation for religious purposes.³⁷ A female interviewee explained that IDPs also had to work on a bridge construction project when the monk U Thuzana was alive: *“We used to be called to help people build a bridge, and to do things for merit too. Now, the monk is dead so we don’t have to build*

³⁷ Karen Human Rights Group (October 2013), [“Incident Report: Monk orders forced labour for bridge construction, Hpapun District”](#); Karen Human Rights Group (April 2013), [“Papun Situation Update: Forced labour in Bu Tho Township, January to February 2013”](#).

³⁸ Frontier Myanmar (March 2018), [“Myaing Gyi Ngu’s uneasy peace in Kayin State”](#).

KHRG documented that children also have to participate in merit-making activities, which undermines their ability to access education. Indeed, a respondent reported that religious work was one of the reasons why his children could not attend school anymore: *“They used to go to school when we lived in the village. Since we came here, they have to do religious work to get merit.”*

IV. Barriers to Return

In addition to the various challenges that IDPs face in meeting their daily needs while displaced, they can be practically, mentally, and emotionally impaired by the existence of barriers to their return. As mentioned above, IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu are concerned about their ability to generate income and to make sure that their children can access important resources such as education. These people are also disheartened by the uncertainty of their future. However, they feel that they cannot return home yet. This section explores their perceptions of the barriers preventing them from doing so.

Key Issues of Concern

1. 82% of interviewees reported that landmine contamination is preventing them from returning to their homes.
2. Frequent skirmishes, human rights violations and the close proximity of multiple armed actors are additional barriers to the safe return of IDPs in Hpapun and Hpa-an districts.
3. Because of the protracted nature of the displacement, agricultural lands belonging to IDPs have become fallow and unproductive. It can take up to a year for their land to become productive again.

A. Landmines

In 82% of the interviews, landmines were explicitly mentioned as a barrier preventing the return of IDPs. As one respondent from Htee Tha Hta explained: *“I am afraid of going back to my village because I have witnessed people who went back and stepped on landmines. Some of them died.”* Significant parts of Myanmar remain contaminated by landmines, notably ethnic areas. Overall, 3,539 landmine casualties have been recorded countrywide for the period from 2007 to 2017.³⁹ One male IDP interviewed by KHRG confirmed the fact that landmines have been a long-standing issue in the region: *“My daughter lost her leg because she stepped on a landmine eight years ago. She went to the fields and stepped on a landmine on her way back. The landmines were planted by KNLA soldiers. They came and told us that they had planted them.”*

A longstanding and widespread problem

According to the UN Myanmar Information Management Unit (MIMU), all townships in Kayin State have been contaminated by landmines over past decades.⁴⁰ So far, no landmines have been removed under formal clearance programmes, and casualties have been documented in every township in 2016, as well as in Hlaingbwe Township in 2017.⁴¹ As of December 2017, Kayin State had the highest

82%

of respondents reported that
landmines were the main barrier to
return

³⁹ Myanmar Information Management Unit (December 2018), [“Townships with Known Landmine Contamination and Casualties in Myanmar \(2017\)”](#).

⁴⁰ Myanmar Information Management Unit (November 2018), [“Townships with Suspected Landmine Contamination \(1999-2017\) and Casualties in Myanmar \(Jan-Dec 2017\)”](#).

⁴¹ Myanmar Information Management Unit (November 2018), [“Townships with Suspected Landmine Contamination \(1999-2017\) and Casualties in Myanmar \(Jan-Dec 2017\)”](#).

rate of landmine casualties by known data from 2007 to 2017, amounting to 26.7% of all documented cases at the national level,⁴² for a total of at least 423 victims as of December 2016.⁴³

KHRG reports indicate that the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups are not doing enough to clear landmines despite their commitment to do so under section 5(e) of the NCA. According to the Executive Director of the Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security, the implementation of this provision has stalled due to mistrust between the signatories.⁴⁴ KHRG has documented just two cases of armed groups undertaking small-scale mine clearance, and only to improve military access. Therefore, many unmarked landmines remain, causing severe risk of injury and livelihood restrictions to civilians in Southeast Myanmar, who do not feel that their security situation has improved.⁴⁵

KHRG documented that some IDPs stepped on landmines when they went back to their area of origin to collect resources. One female respondent from Klo Hta explained: *“There have been some landmine victims. They went back to their village in order to find betel nuts because they do not earn any income here. They stepped on landmines and got injured.”* This situation fosters a fear of landmines among IDPs, which prevents them from permanently returning to their village. For example, according to an IDP from Kan Nyi Naung: *“I do not feel confident enough to return to my village because a person was injured from a landmine explosion just a few days ago. He is a villager from Htee Tha Hta. He went there to find vegetables and stepped on a landmine.”*

The presence of landmines in the Myaing Gyi Ngu area further contributes to this climate of fear, as an IDP from Kan Nyi Naung confirmed: *“Landmines explode every day. One of them exploded last night and another one exploded the other day. We are afraid to go back to our village because we hear landmine explosions every day around the camp.”* One interviewee from Yaw Po reported that IDPs have started avoiding some areas at the slightest suspicion of landmine contamination: *“People said that there were no landmines around the camp, but children saw pieces of wire on the ground where we collect bamboo shoots. We are worried that they might be landmines so we are afraid of going back there anymore.”* This restricts their ability to collect resources around the camp, which further worsens their humanitarian situation.

A shared responsibility

Even though the responsibility for each landmine planted is difficult to assess, it appears that all the armed actors active in this area have contributed to the landmine crisis. KHRG reports from the conflict period document that the Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups have used landmines for both defensive and offensive purposes. Since the signing of the NCA, armed actors have also started planting landmines to protect key income-generating activities that they control.⁴⁶

⁴² Myanmar Information Management Unit (November 2018), [“Townships with Suspected Landmine Contamination \(1999-2017\) and Casualties in Myanmar \(Jan-Dec 2017\)”](#).

⁴³ Myanmar Information Management Unit (May 2018), [“Townships with Known Landmine Contamination \(2017\) and Casualties in Myanmar \(as of Dec 2016\)”](#).

⁴⁴ The Diplomat (March 2018), [“Myanmar’s Deadly Mines”](#).

⁴⁵ Karen Human Rights Group (October 2017), [“Foundation of Fear – 25 years of villagers’ voices from southeast Myanmar”](#), 53.

⁴⁶ Karen Human Rights Group (October 2017), [“Foundation of Fear – 25 years of villagers’ voices from southeast Myanmar”](#), 51.

The use of landmines by the KNLA has already been documented by KHRG.⁴⁷ One IDP from A--- village confirmed that the group used landmines in civilian areas as a defence strategy: *"We told the KNLA not to plant landmines but they said that they had to in order to protect themselves from their enemies. It would have been better if they had planted them in the mountains, but they planted them in the fields. Therefore, it only affects the villagers' animals such as dogs, pigs and buffaloes."*

In December 2016, KHRG also documented that many landmines had been planted by DKBA splinter soldiers in Hpa-an District, including in village areas and on agricultural lands. As a result, one village head was killed and another villager was injured in two incidents in September and October 2016, respectively.⁴⁸ The responsibility of this particular armed group was confirmed by several IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu. One interviewee from B--- village explained to KHRG: *"We told the DKBA [splinter] not to plant landmines, but they did not listen. They told us that they would clear the area before they leave, but no one took responsibility for that."*

Another interviewee from B--- village reported that he believes the BGF had planted landmines in the area surrounding his village. KHRG has documented that government forces have used landmines in different parts of Southeast Myanmar on several occasions over the last few years. In 2015, BGF Battalion #1013 planted landmines outside their camp in Hpapun District without warning the local community, leading to the destruction of livestock.⁴⁹ In 2018, Tatmadaw Infantry Battalion #5 planted landmines in the Htee Hkuh area (Toungoo District / Bago Region), in which KNLA units were stationed.⁵⁰ This is a clear violation of section 5(a) of the NCA, which forbids laying landmines in ceasefire areas.

A threat to livelihoods

Landmines pose serious barriers to livelihoods because most of the local communities have relied on farming for food and income. This can prevent IDPs from returning home, as they would not be able to access sufficient resources there. One IDP from Kan Nyi Naung told KHRG that her agricultural lands had been contaminated by landmines: *"I work on hill farms. I am afraid to go to my two teak plantations now because landmines are planted there. We are even afraid to go and clear the area of vegetation."* Another IDP from Thay Hkaw made the same point: *"We cannot go back yet because of the landmines. Even if we were to return, I'm not sure that we would be able to work. We are too afraid of going to our farms."*

When planted in forest areas, landmines deprive villagers of valuable resources such as wild vegetables and wood, as another female IDP from Thay Hkaw explained: *"There are a lot of landmines so we are not allowed to go back. They prevent us from going to the forest around the village to find vegetables."* One interviewee from Htee Tha Hta also raised the issue and told KHRG that one of his relatives had been injured by a landmine in a forest

⁴⁷ Karen Human Rights Group (August 2016), [*"Two separate landmine incidents happened in Hpapun and Nyaunglebin districts, March and April 2016"*](#); Karen Human Rights Group (October 2017), [*"Nyaunglebin Field Report: Militarisation, land confiscation, violent abuse, 're-relocated' IDPs, landmines, and development projects, December 2015 to December 2016"*](#).

⁴⁸ Karen Human Rights Group (December 2016), [*"Recent fighting between newly-reformed DKBA and joint forces of BGF and Tatmadaw soldiers led more than six thousand Karen villagers to flee in Hpa-an District, September 2016"*](#).

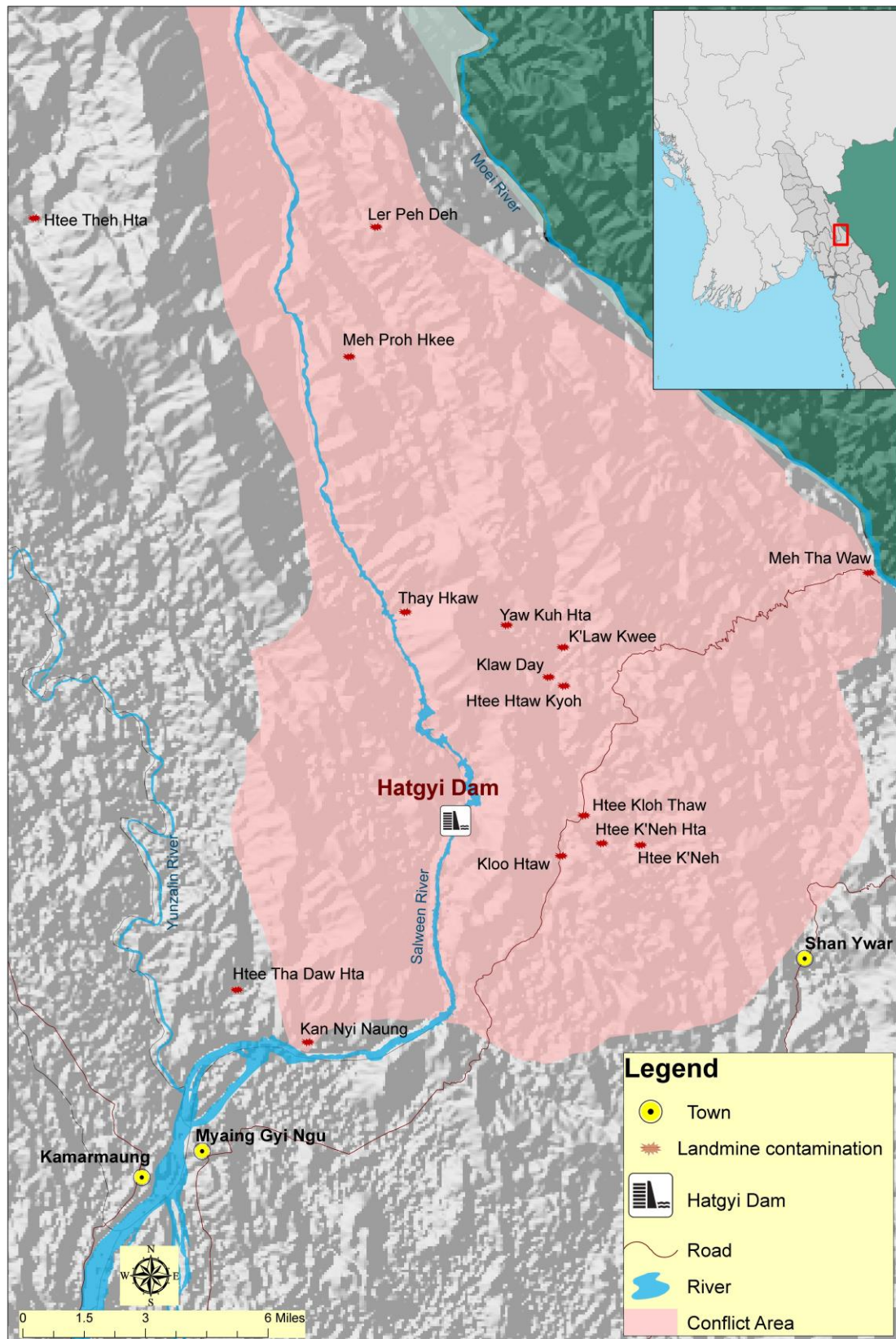
⁴⁹ Karen Human Rights Group (March 2016), [*"Hpapun Incident Report: Landmine kills one buffalo and injures two in Bu Tho Township, April 2015"*](#).

⁵⁰ Karen Human Rights Group (January 2019), [*"Toungoo Situation Update: Tatmadaw military activities continue in Htantabin and Thaundaunggyi townships"*](#).

area: *“I have one grandchild who stepped on a landmine while searching for vegetables in the forest ten days ago. His left leg was injured so he was sent to Hpa-an hospital.”*

Landmines also injure and kill livestock, which villagers rely on to plough their fields, but also as a source of food and a mean of transport. One IDP from Htee Kloh Thaw confirmed the negative impact of landmines on cattle in his area of origin: *“There have been a lot of cows and buffalos that died because of landmines, but we do not know how many. People just saw their remains like that. I have two [cows] but I cannot find them anymore. People who went back to the village did not find them.”* In addition, an interviewee from Kan Nyi Naung reported to KHRG that landmines had also killed several animals in his village: *“People did not get injured by the landmines, but animals did. Four cows, two dogs and three of my goats died because of the landmines. Four goats are missing now.”* Losing cattle has serious consequences for subsistence farmers, as adult cows and goats are worth at least 400,000 kyat (264 USD) and 100,000 kyat (66 USD), respectively.

Militarisation and Landmine Contamination around Myaing Gyi Ngu



B. The Presence of Military Actors

In 67% of the interviews of IDPs conducted by KHRG, the mere presence of armed actors in their area of origin was explicitly mentioned as a barrier preventing their return, as a male interviewee from Kan Nyi Naung confirmed to KHRG: *“If there are no more armed groups based nearby, we will feel secure enough to go back to our village.”* An IDP from Htee Tha Hta explained that he decided not to return because armed actors used to steal his livestock: *“I am very determined not to ever go back. Back in our village, we could not raise cattle anymore, the armed groups would take them all.”*

Barred from returning

In some cases, respondents reported being threatened or not allowed to go back. As one female IDP from Kan Nyi Naung explained: *“I want to go back to my village. If I live there, it will be easy to secure our livelihoods. However, we were verbally threatened not to go back. We would also be afraid to stay in our village as there are many armed groups nearby. Even if one group allows us to go back, another won’t.”* Another interviewee from Htee Kloh Thaw reported to KHRG that the Tatmadaw barred him from returning to his village and imposed restrictions on freedom of movement in the area: *“The Myanmar authorities [Tatmadaw] do not allow us to go to our betel nut plantations. If we go back to our village we cannot even sleep there, so we can’t do anything.”* A female respondent from Kan Nyi Naung reported that the KNLA that does not allow IDPs to return: *“The BGF and the Tatmadaw have already allowed us to go back, but not the KNLA. As we have no other options, we just stay here.”* Preventing IDPs from returning to their village is a direct violation of section 9(q) of the NCA, which states that the government and the ethnic armed organisations shall permit civilians to move freely inside ceasefire areas.

New times, old fears

Karen communities remain afraid of the Tatmadaw, mostly due to the widespread human rights violations committed by its soldiers against civilian populations in the past. They fear that they may inflict abuses on them arbitrarily.⁵¹ Therefore, some IDPs refuse to go back to their area of origin because Tatmadaw units are still operating or stationed there, as one male IDP from Kan Nyi Naung confirmed: *“The Tatmadaw is based in our village so I would be concerned for my security if I were to return there. Of course, if they leave, we would be able to live peacefully and freely.”* The fear of the Tatmadaw is heightened among women, as the widespread and systematic use of sexual violence was ingrained in military tactics before the 2012 preliminary ceasefire.⁵² A female respondent from Yaw Po shared her concerns with KHRG: *“Now, there are a lot of Tatmadaw soldiers in the area so it is not safe for women to travel. We must worry about our security.”*

⁵¹ For more information, see Karen Human Rights Group (October 2017), [“Foundation of Fear – 25 years of villagers’ voices from southeast Myanmar”](#).

⁵² For more information, see Karen Human Rights Group (December 2018), [“Suffering in silence? Sexual violence against women in Southeast Myanmar”](#).



The future remains uncertain for the IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu. [Photo: KHRG]

Some IDPs also declared that they were afraid of being subjected to human rights abuses by other armed actors, as one female interviewee from B--- village reported to KHRG: *"The DKBA [splinter] settled in our area of origin, and the KNLA is now based in our village. We are afraid of living among the soldiers and of being used as forced porters."* The use of forced civilian labour by armed actors has been a long-standing and well-documented issue in Southeast Myanmar. It continues to occur despite the NCA. In October 2017, one village head and his wife were subjected to forced labour by a Tatmadaw Major in Win Yay Township (Dooطلا District),⁵³ and villagers had to pay compensation in Bu Tho and Dwe Lo Townships (Hpapun District) for refusing to serve as porters for the BGF.⁵⁴ The same month, both the Tatmadaw and the BGF forced villagers to serve as navigators and porters in Hlaingbwe Township (Hpa-an

District), which exposed them to landmines and attacks by the DKBA splinter.⁵⁵ The DKBA splinter also forced several villagers to serve as porters in September 2016 in Hpa-an District,⁵⁶ and one villager from Hpapun District was injured by BGF soldiers while serving as a porter for the KNLA in 2013.⁵⁷

Unstable situation

The continuous presence of armed actors in the IDPs' areas of origin also raises their fear of renewed fighting, as one male respondent from Kan Nyi Naung reported: *"We are worried about the fighting. We cannot anticipate when skirmishes between armed groups will happen. We can only live peacefully if there is no more fighting. I hope that the situation will improve in the future."* This preoccupation was echoed by another IDP from Ka Law Kwin,

⁵³ Karen Human Rights Group (April 2018), ["Dooطلا Incident Report: Forced labour ordered by Tatmadaw officer in Win Yay Township, October 2017"](#).

⁵⁴ Karen Human Rights Group (September 2018), ["Hpapun Incident Report: Forced portering and extortion in Bu Tho and Dwe Lo townships, October 2017"](#).

⁵⁵ Karen Human Rights Group (December 2017), ["Ongoing fighting, displacement, landmines, porter demands, and child recruitment in Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District, October and November 2017"](#).

⁵⁶ Karen Human Rights Group (January 2018), ["Hpa-an Field Report: Explicit killing, fighting leading to massive displacement, arbitrary taxation and the improvement of healthcare and education, January to December 2016"](#).

⁵⁷ Karen Human Rights Group (March 2016), ["Hpapun Field Report: January to December 2013"](#).

who talked to KHRG about the uncertainty surrounding the evolution of the security situation in his village: *“We could return to our village now, but we are worried about the security situation. We don’t know whether more skirmishes will happen in the future. We just don’t have enough confidence to go back now.”*

Armed fighting was explicitly regarded as a barrier to return in 55% of the interviews conducted by KHRG. This highlights a lack of trust in the peace process among IDPs, a feeling that is fuelled by sporadic skirmishes between armed actors. When asked about how often the fighting occurred since he was displaced, a respondent from Kan Nyi Naung replied: *“Quite often. We often hear explosions but we don’t know whether they’re from rifles, mortars or landmines. There was even an explosion last night.”* Another IDP from Mae Th’Waw Mote Wa reported to KHRG that he was afraid to return to his village because of the volatile security situation: *“The fighting [between the DKBA splinter and the Tatmadaw] intensified after we came here [two years ago]. It probably went on for a year. We are afraid to go back to our village and never have since we came here. I want to go back to my village, but if the fighting does not stop then we won’t be able to.”*

KHRG has documented that periodic fighting has continued over the last couple of years. This situation acts as a deterrent to the return of displaced persons, and also led to an increase in the number of IDPs in the camp since 2016.⁵⁸ Professor Mikael Gravers attributed the continuing violence to the fact that the DKBA and the monk U Thuzana were against the increased dominance of the Tatmadaw and the BGF in the area, and also worried about the progress made on the construction of the Hatgyi Dam.⁵⁹ In 2017 and 2018, fighting also broke out between the KNLA and the Tatmadaw when the latter entered KNU territory without prior permission in search of the DKBA splinter group. In August 2018, a local KNLA commander told KHRG that he believes that the Tatmadaw is trying to establish control of the area around the proposed Hatgyi Dam site.⁶⁰

C. Livelihood Challenges

In 55% of the interviews, respondents indicated that they could not return because they would face livelihood challenges if they did. An IDP from Ka Law Kwin confirmed that it would not be economically viable to return because his lands became unproductive while he was displaced: *“We haven’t been to our village in a long time. Now, our lands became forests. We would just face more hardship if we go back now because there is no more food in our village.”* When asked if he would feel confident in his ability to secure his family’s livelihood if he were to return, a respondent from Kan Nyi Naung replied: *“Not yet. Given the current situation, I cannot return without humanitarian support.”*

In 30% of the interviews, IDPs also reported to KHRG that their houses, fields or food storage facilities had been damaged. In addition to contributing to their displacement, this situation now prevents their return, as it deprives them of shelter and/or undermines their ability to produce and store food. This issue was raised by two respondents from C--- village, who explained their situation to KHRG: *“We would have to start from the beginning if we returned to our village. All our rice barns were destroyed by forest fires. We would face food shortage problems if we went back now.”*

⁵⁸ Karen Human Rights Group (August 2017), [*“Hpa-an Situation Update: Hlaingbwe Township, Paingkyon Township and Naba Township, March to May 2017”*](#).

⁵⁹ GRAVERS (n.d.), [*“A Saint in Command? Spiritual protection, justice and religious tensions in the Karen State”*](#), 90.

⁶⁰ Karen Human Rights Group (September 2018), [*“Fighting breaks out between Tatmadaw and KNLA near the proposed Hatgyi dam site”*](#).

Several IDPs think that their humanitarian situation would worsen if they returned. When asked whether his life would improve if he leaves the camp, one respondent from Mae Th'Waw Mote Wa replied: *"There will be no change, only more challenges and problems. We have no money to support ourselves with small children."* In a January 2019 report, KHRG documented that only a quarter of the IDPs went back to their villages in Mone Township (Bago Region), an area with few work opportunities, mainly because they did not benefit from appropriate support measures to facilitate their return.⁶¹ Similarly, the lack of public or private programmes that would allow returnees to secure their livelihoods in their area of origin remains an important barrier to the return of the IDPs living in Myaing Gyi Ngu. It is crucial to provide food support and access to basic services to returnees during the time that it takes for their farms to become productive again. If this kind of support is not provided, IDPs could have no choice but to sell their lands for a low price to meet immediate food needs, which would put them in a difficult economic situation in the long run.

⁶¹ Karen Human Rights Group (January 2019), "[Nyaunglebin Situation Update: IDPs face difficulties returning to their villages of origin](#)".

V. Conclusion

Displacement is an all-too-familiar experience for people in Southeast Myanmar. Seven decades of violent conflict, widespread human rights violations, and an increase in large-scale land confiscations have created a climate of fear and uncertainty for civilian populations.

The IDPs living in Myaing Gyi Ngu tell a common story of militarisation and development: fleeing their homes multiple times throughout their lives, developing strategies to avoid getting caught in the crossfire between armed actors and hoping to, one day, return to their villages to live in peace. The difficulties in their day-to-day lives are shared by IDPs throughout Myanmar's ethnic regions.

Although the IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu have shown great resilience in their interviews with KHRG, a wide swath of their human rights are being violated, and their needs are being ignored. They lack basic necessities: clean water, a balanced diet, a safe shelter, and access to work. The Myanmar government has not done enough to provide dignified living conditions to these IDPs. Humanitarian aid providers also face restrictions in accessing this area, because of the presence of multiple armed actors.

The future of IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu remains uncertain, despite their overwhelming desire to return to their homes and their lands. Ongoing skirmishes and extensive landmine contamination are overwhelming barriers to the safe and dignified return of IDPs. In the two years that they have been displaced, their plantations and agricultural fields have become unproductive. Humanitarian support is necessary during the time it takes for IDPs to start reaping benefits from their land. Current land laws, which subordinate the tenure rights of indigenous communities to companies developing large-scale infrastructure projects, could increase displacement around Myaing Gyi Ngu, and throughout Myanmar.

VI. Recommendations

In order to improve the living conditions of IDPs in Southeast Myanmar, KHRG recommends:

I. To the Myanmar Government

International Human Rights Law

- Ratify all the Core International Human Rights Instruments to which Myanmar is not yet a party, notably the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict; the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment; and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination;
- Ratify the Convention on Cluster Munitions and the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on their Destruction;
- Ratify the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts.

Humanitarian Assistance

Provide, as a matter of urgency and in compliance with the minimum standards laid out in the Sphere Handbook, adequate humanitarian assistance to displaced people living in IDP camps. The government should notably:

- Distribute adequate quantities of drinking water or water purification materials;
- Distribute enough diverse foods to fully cover the nutritional needs of displaced men, women and children;
- Ensure that all IDPs have access to safe, clean and well-maintained toilets nearby, as well as laundry and shower facilities with running water;
- Distribute enough sanitary products, including soap, diapers and sanitary pads for women;
- Set up a waste management system in all three sites;
- Take the necessary steps to provide displaced families with adequate shelters and housing items that can protect them from adverse weather and ensure that their rights to life with dignity, privacy, protection and security are respected;
- Support the development of income-generating activities in the camps to allow IDPs to work for their livelihoods;
- Ensure that all IDPs have access to affordable healthcare services, including essential medicines for the most common diseases affecting them;
- Take the necessary steps to reduce the incidence of preventable diseases in the camps, notably through the distribution of mosquito nets, vaccination and hygiene awareness campaigns;
- Ensure that all displaced children can access primary and secondary education regardless of their economic situation;
- Improve security conditions, including through the installation of public lighting in

the camps and toilet areas;

- Always take into account the special needs of vulnerable groups, such as women, children, the elderly and persons with disabilities when providing humanitarian assistance.

Once all conditions are met to allow for the voluntary, safe and dignified return of IDPs to their areas of origin, take the necessary steps to provide them with adequate financial, material and humanitarian assistance to facilitate the resettlement process.

Policy

- Take the necessary steps to recognise displaced ethnic populations as full citizens and ensure their meaningful participation in the decision-making processes for all policies that affect them.

Land Use and Ownership

- Adopt a comprehensive National Land Law that fully recognises and protects customary land tenure and traditional cultivation practices in line with the 2016 National Land Use Policy; and make sure that it features provisions that protect the land rights of IDPs;
- Take the necessary steps to abolish the Vacant, Fallow and Virgin Land Management Law. In the meantime, refrain from charging villagers with trespassing under its provisions.

Justice

- Establish independent mechanisms to hold accountable, in a public, transparent and fair manner, those responsible for serious crimes committed against civilian populations in Southeast Myanmar.

II. To the Myanmar Government and the KNU

Human Rights

- Develop, collaborating where necessary, adequate mechanisms so that displaced people can obtain legal identification, register land and/or access the necessary documentation to register for available service provisions in the camp.

Humanitarian Assistance

- Develop, collaborating where necessary, assistance packages for returnees to allow them to re-establish sustainable livelihoods. In particular, work with relevant civil society organisations to assess the situation of land in return sites and, as needed, provide assistance to rehabilitate the land to ensure its viability for agriculture.

Land Use and Ownership

- Halt all large-scale natural resource and agriculture investment projects in ethnic areas until all stakeholders have provided free and informed consent, and a genuine peace has been achieved;

- Create a mechanism to provide restitution of property for displaced persons; where restitution is not possible, provide adequate compensation. Any measures taken toward these ends should comply with the Pinheiro Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons.

Policy

- Engage in genuine attempts to advance the peace process through dialogue;
- Engage genuinely with civilians (and CBOs) in ethnic areas and make sure to integrate their concerns and perspectives into provisional and final outcomes of the peace process.

III. To the Tatmadaw (& BGFs), KNLA, and DKBA

- Allow unrestricted access to all IDP camps for outside organisations to provide humanitarian aid;
- Armed actors that have signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) should fully comply with its provisions, especially regarding the protection of civilians;
- Non-signatories should engage meaningfully in peace negotiations and consider signing existing or alternative peace agreements;
- Demilitarise areas close to villages and farms by removing existing troops and dismantling their camps; ceasing military trainings, patrols and transports through, in or near villages or livelihood areas; and immediately end the practice of land confiscations;
- Ban the use of landmines and ensure that all existing landmine areas are clearly marked and villagers informed for their safety;
- As a matter of urgency, initiate high-level talks to establish a comprehensive mine clearance strategy involving all the relevant stakeholders and armed actors; and start demining operations as soon as possible, with a particular focus on IDP return sites and other civilian areas.

IV. To investors

- Halt the construction of the Hatgyi Dam until an agreement based on the principle of free, prior and informed consent can be reached with local communities; and an adequate impact assessment report is conducted in cooperation with all relevant stakeholders;
- Refrain from investing in large-scale infrastructure projects that do not respect basic business and human rights principles, and would further marginalise conflict-affected populations, until a genuine peace is reached.

V. To international donors, humanitarian service providers, and other NGOs/CBOs

- Continue to provide essential services and adequate assistance to IDPs where the government fails to do so; and recognise ethnic service providers and community-based organisations as equal partners in the provision of humanitarian aid;
- Continue promoting and carrying out Mine Risk Education activities until an agreement on demining can be reached between the Myanmar government, the KNU and other relevant armed actors.



“[The KNU and the Myanmar government] know very well about all of this. However, they just ignore it. They witnessed our living conditions. When we first arrived here, they gathered village leaders many times and told them that we could return. They know how we suffer.”

- A male IDP from Aye Lin Thar Yar Kwin, Myaing Gyi Ngu

“To be honest, nobody wants to stay here. We really want to go back home. Now, we are afraid to go back to our villages. Even if we could go back home, we would not feel free and safe. We really hope that the situation will stabilise. I am not happy here.”

- A male IDP from Mar Lar Yu, Myaing Gyi Ngu

Founded in 1992, KHRG is an independent local organisation committed to improving the human rights situation in Myanmar by training and equipping local people to document their stories and gather evidence of human rights abuses; disseminating this information worldwide; and working directly with local villagers to enhance their strategies for protecting themselves from abuse and the effects of abuse. Examples of our work can be seen online at www.khrgh.org



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma