

NORTHERN KAREN STATE

Reflections on Luthaw Township Livelihoods

Research Briefing by Ashley South

January 2022

Kawthoolei (Luthaw Township) at dawn



→ Note

Overview

Security - The Number One Concern

Assistance and Services

Livelihoods and Agriculture

Climate Change

Recommendations/Needs



NOTE

This research briefing is based on a visit to Luthaw Township (KNU Mudraw/Papun District, northern Karen State; KNLA 5 Brigade), 1-15 January 2022. This is the northern part of the Salween Peace Park.¹

The author has experience conducting research in Karen and other conflict-affected parts of Burma (/Myanmar), but is not an expert on livelihoods or agriculture issues.

Interviews and observations were conducted while on mission with the Free Burma Rangers, primarily in Sah Mu Plaw / Ler Mu Plaw Village Tract (*G-roo*).²

Many thanks to the Rangers (especially Sahale, Suu and Peter), to Paddy Doh Say and Thra Eh Paw and Thra Joseph, for helping me understand and interpret, and to the extraordinary and resilient Karen people of Luthaw Township. Thanks to SL, KC and TS for valuable feedback and comments, and to SL and SE for the photos.

Inevitable errors and omissions are my own.

This project is funded by UK Research and Innovation through the Global Challenges Research Fund (grant reference number ES/T004509/1)

¹ The 5000 km² Salween Peace Park (established in 2018) is probably the most important development and conservation initiative in Karen areas. This radical alternative vision of activism and sovereignty can be a model for future efforts at locally owned forest management and conservation. The SPP was awarded the UN's Equator Prize in September 2020, the same year one of its founders (Paul Sein Twa from KESAN) won the Goldman Environmental Prize (the 'Nobel Prize for nature').

² KNU administrative boundaries (Seven districts, each composed of townships, composed of Village Tracts) broadly follows the British colonial administrative model. See Ashley South, *Burma's Longest War: anatomy of the Karen conflict* (Transnational Institute/Burma Centre Netherlands March 2011).



OVERVIEW

The resilience³ of Karen communities is extraordinary. Despite repeated attacks from the Myanmar Army (MA, or Tatmadaw), over several decades, communities are determined to stay in their ancestral homelands. Several people told us of having their houses destroyed (burnt) by the MA, and then rebuilding - often after extensive periods as Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), in hiding in the jungle. While nearly 200,000 Karen fled to refugee camps in Thailand during the worst of the MA atrocities of the 1990s and 2000s, and over 90,000 are still there, most of the approximately 20,000 civilians in Luthaw Township⁴ have managed to stay in their Village Tract, maintaining and defending their lands.

Most people I ask said “we live in Kawthoolei” (not in Myanmar).

³ Resilience is the ability (of individual, family, community – or ethnic nation) to withstand and recover from shocks and cope with crises. The ways in which groups of people are affected by climate change impacts depends on their exposure and vulnerability to and coping capacity regarding or risks (hazards, man-made or natural). Resilient people and communities cope with shocks, and return to or improve previous standards of living and human security. Resilience can be understood in terms of capacities: Absorptive capacity prepares for or mitigates the impacts of hazards, focusing on essential goods, structures and functions. Adaptive capacity brings about longer-term change, including through adapted and diversified livelihoods and farming techniques (supported by awareness raising and training). Transformative capacity goes beyond existing absorptive and adaptive abilities, challenging the deep structures which make existing systems unsustainable and inequitable. See Ashley South and Liliana Demartini, *Towards a Tipping Point? Climate Change, Disaster Risk Reduction and Resilience in Southeast Myanmar* (ActionAid Myanmar 2020).

⁴ Community leaders estimate the population at 65% Christian (mostly Baptist), 35% Animist and 5% Buddhist (hey: these are approximations). The great majority of villagers are Sgaw Karen, plus a few Shan villages. Overall, Karen population is over 60% Buddhist, 30% Christian, with some animists & Muslims (see South 2011).

MAP: LUTHAW TOWNSHIP IN HPAPUN (MUTRAW) DISTRICT





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SECURITY - THE NUMBER ONE CONCERN

In the Papun/Mutraw hills and other ethnic areas of Myanmar, the Tatmadaw has long been experienced as an illegitimate, violent and predatory force. All interlocutors mentioned the security situation (specifically, attacks from the Myanmar Army and Air Force) as the greatest threat to the lives and livelihoods of civilians in this area.

Particularly following the coup of 1 February 2021, Mutraw District (as well as other Karen areas - see FBR reports) has been subject to several air raids, which have destroyed a school and hospital, and killed civilians. Fortunately, although almost the entire population of Mutraw District (approximately 70-80,000 people) fled in early April, following Myanmar Force attacks, nearly all residents of this township returned to their villages in time to prepare rice fields for the coming rainy season. However, people are ready to flee again, and fearful of further attacks. A couple of occasions during our visit there were reports of Myanmar Air force aircraft nearby. The excavation of household bomb shelters, and those for schools and other public buildings, has become a standard adaptation to the bombing, as masks to Covid.

During this period, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO) and Village Tract militia have launched numerous attacks on MA bases. Tatmadaw bases have been overrun by the KNLA, or abandoned by the MA in 5 Brigade. The KNU reports that during 2021, 1,364 MA soldiers were killed and 1,313 wounded by the KNLA in 5 Brigade alone. Tatmadaw soldiers have defected to the KNLA during this period.

During the four days I spent in Ler Mu Plaw and Sah Mu Plaw villages, there were SEVERAL clashes (mortar, machine-gun and automatic rifle fire, and landmine explosions). Several Myanmar Army soldiers were killed. Six more defected to the KNU/KNLA.

In the areas I visited, the Tatmadaw seems tied down by the KNLA, who frequently snipe at troops in Myanmar Army bases, and if "the enemy" leaves camp or tries to resupply, they are regularly harassed and attacked

by the KNLA, with multiple Myanmar Army casualties. Most Tatmadaw camps in this area have not been resupplied since the end of the last dry season. Many are reportedly on reduced rations. Defected Tatmadaw soldiers say they cannot emerge from their trenches during daytime for fear of KNLA snipers, and risk their lives if they want to bathe or fetch water.

Villagers repeatedly mentioned that the KNU and KNLA protect them from the Myanmar Army, and from the criminal SAC junta (and before that, from central government authorities which are not regarded as legitimate in these Karen areas).

ASSISTANCE AND SERVICES

As well as the FBR, Karen CSOs are documenting human rights abuses, and involved in advocacy (e.g. KPSN members, including KHRG). Some local organisations have provided emergency assistance, mostly in the form of food and medicine (FBR, CIDKP, KORD etc). No direct international assistance has been received in this area, although some support to IDPs is provided cross-border by the TBC, through local partners. The township and District KNU also provide food support to IDPs in need. In the past, stockpiles of emergency support rice were purchased by the District KNU from Karen State. This has not been possible in 2021-22, due to the ongoing SAC attacks to the north.

The other primary needs reported by many interlocutors is hugely important in the context of Resilience and coping mechanisms: villagers help each other. Often, this takes the form of relatively better-off local leaders giving or lending food to those with insufficient. Poor harvests could result from families and village communities being displaced by conflict, because of natural hazards - which are increasing in the context of climate change (see below) - or because female-headed households (for example) are unable to cultivate enough land to feed the family. Where possible, villages repay these debts when the harvest is in. If this is not possible, debts of food (and sometimes of money) are often forgiven by benefactors. Sometimes, those in debt work in the fields of people who have offered them food and other support. There are no commercial moneylenders in the township.

These local coping mechanisms overlap with traditional Karen customs of communal agriculture. Families take turns helping each other to prepare hillside swiddens for upland rice cultivation prior to the rainy season. (For an account of Karen shifting agriculture, see below). Such communal approaches are less common in relation to irrigated rice fields.



Shifting upland rice cultivation during rainy season

The other main need expressed by several interlocutors was greater medical support. The Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW) operates an extensive network of hospitals and clinics, as do some charities (e.g. Earth Mission Asia), and the KNLA has attached medical units which also help civilians. Luthaw and other townships in the District are occasionally visited by backpack medical teams. Medical support otherwise is provided by FBR - mission teams, and also the Jungle School of Medicine, Kawthoolei (at FBR HQ). Common ailments include malaria (although not common in the winter, when I visited) anaemia, and aches and pains among the old, and stomach problems/diarrhoea.

There are seven schools in the Village Tract, including one high school, administered by the KNU's Karen Education and Culture Department. Teachers receive 9000 baht a year from KECD (through Karen Teachers Working Group). Most schools need support with infrastructure and teaching materials - although the community do their best to meet these needs. Basic education is provided free by the KNU (KECD) - although parents need some money to pay for books, uniforms etc. There are a few options for tertiary education in the District - for example the New Generation School, and a junior college in Dae Bu Noh. Both charge fees, although at a very low rate.

The KNU Forest Department (KFD), together with local villages, administers community forests and other protected areas. If villagers are caught hunting or collecting illegal products in these areas, they are first given a warning, and then punished (usually through fines). There has been no commercial logging in the area for many years.

Many villages lack latrines or clean access to water. Few private households have latrines.



Organic irrigated rice (paddy) fields, fertilised by buffaloes

LIVELIHOODS AND AGRICULTURE

Except for some vegetable cultivation (yams, pumpkin, cucumber etc), mostly during the rainy season, and some raising of pigs, chickens, dogs, and ducks, rice is the main harvest. Some rice is sold locally, in order to pay off debts. However, this is mostly a subsistence economy: food (primarily rice) is grown for consumption, not for sale. Reportedly, the “average villager” eats meat maybe once a week. Protein is supplemented by hunting of game such as squirrels and birds.

Several villages (perhaps one third?) have buffaloes. These are used for ploughing the fields, and occasionally sold for additional income.

The KNU taxes agricultural production.⁵ One important purpose of these food levies is to support the KNLA troops, who are not paid a salary. Several informants mentioned that if families are stressed (food insecure or otherwise adversely affected) the KNU is sympathetic and flexible, and will not tax families if this will expose them to significant food insecurity. Reportedly, the KNU is not levying taxes this year, because of the exceptional circumstances following Myanmar Army air raids and widespread forced displacement.

According to the Luthaw Township Chairman and Secretary, there are approximately 1000 acres of paddy field in the township's c.150 villages (the number changes, depending how “village” is defined and understood⁶). Somewhere between one quarter and a half of villagers cultivate irrigated rice fields (or paddies, *si plaw*). These are mostly organic, with very little use of insecticides, and fertiliser mostly limited to the dung of buffaloes and cows. The harvest this year was fairly good, and most irrigated rice farmers have enough rice to feed their families for most of the year. This has not always been the case for irrigated rice farmers in previous years.

⁵ Two tins of paddy, for each acre of irrigated rice field; four tins of paddy for six tins planted of upland rice.

⁶ For example, there are seven small hamlets in Sah Moo Plaw - which itself can be regarded as a single village.



Karen Hamlet

The majority of villagers plant upland, swidden (so-called “slash and burn”) rice fields (*hku* in Karen, or *taung-ya* in Burmese). Ideally, rotation follows a 10-14 year cycle. Without the hazards of constant conflict, and with a low population density, this type of traditional agriculture can be sustainable. However, decades of conflict have reduced the land available for cultivation - not least because Myanmar Army bases occupy several areas threatening farmers, and reducing their scope of cultivation (and/or Tatmadaw bases are located on potential farmland). With increased population density, villagers have to return to previous upland rice fields more frequently, resulting in a lower yield. Furthermore, swiddens are vulnerable to attack by rats and other pests. In general and on average, *hku* farmers can provide about six months rice per year for their families.

Widespread shifting agriculture leads to deforestation. The reduced levels of several rivers in the township (particularly the Yunzalin) may be a result of reduced forest cover, which can also result in flooding and other hazards.

A few families have relatives in the USA, Thailand, and elsewhere overseas, who provide some remittances. However, few families have much cash.



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Variegated land-use - forest, bamboo and previous shifting agriculture (so-called "slash and burn") rice fields

Since the 2012 KNU ceasefire (which effectively broke down in 2021), there are more roads in the township (particularly over the past four or five years - mostly dirt "motorbike roads), and also more trash (litter). Historically, the KNU has resisted road building as an avenue for Tatmadaw invasion and external resource extraction. Recently however, the KNU has acquired heavy machinery and engages in road building to suit the needs of local communities, such as marketing of local commodities and importation of needed goods from Thailand, as well as for better transportation of KNU officials.



Irrigated rice (paddy) terraces

CLIMATE CHANGE

A couple of key informants mentioned that the rainy season has become shorter in recent years, and the weather hotter (less cold in the winter). This is consistent with data provided by the previous government in Myanmar (see South and Demartini 2020). As a result, some villages are noticing slightly decreased yield for both irrigated and upland rice - and smaller grains. Farmers also say the longer dry seasons complicate the planting of perennial crops, such as fruit or coffee, which are beneficial for land conservation, and important to support adaptation initiatives. These impacts of climate change are likely to be exacerbated in the future.



Perennial crops – betel nut, banana, durian, etc., mixed with bamboo and indigenous forest





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RECOMMENDATIONS/NEEDS

Based on the limited number of interviews undertaken:

Physical Security/protection

- › NB: urgent need to support KNU and KNLA, which protect and support vulnerable Karen villagers.

Food security

- › Develop *pilot project* and *farmer field schools*⁷:
 - More irrigated paddy terraces, for improved rice yields, and to reduce deforestation caused by rotational agriculture.
 - Work with farmers and technical experts to identify and develop climate change-adapted agricultural strategies and techniques.⁸
 - Promote locally-adapted, sustainable, and marketable food and cash crops (durians, coffee, avocados, cardamom etc - including for export to Thailand) to reduce reliance on shifting cultivation and improve economic self-sufficiency;

Water and Sanitation

- › Improve village water sources, notably gravity-driven piped water networks that are well adapted in the Karen hills
- › Promote the use and benefits of latrines in villages
- › Better medical services - which should be provided by KDHW and the District/Township KNU, supported by relevant CSOs, and international technical assistance as necessary.

⁷ In this instance, farmer field school is not intended as an agricultural education station to which farmers are brought for training, a model which has proven both ineffective and unsustainable in practice; rather, FFS here means in situ training of farmers by indigenous, trained Karen experts familiar with local conditions as well as improved methods, administering the training in villages, on demonstration plots provided by participating farmers.

⁸ Where adequate water and land are available, this can include new rice varieties and techniques - e.g. System of Rice Intensification.

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