



People fleeing into the forest to escape airstrikes in the Salween Peace Park, Mutraw district

SALWEEN PEACE PARK UNDER ATTACK!

Burmese military violence undermines Indigenous Karen conservation for peace

Introduction

On March 27th, 2021, the Burmese military dictatorship began launching deadly airstrikes on Day Bu Noh and surrounding villages¹, in the heart of the Salween Peace Park in northern Karen State's Mutraw (Hpapun) District, as well as in other Karen areas outside of the peace park in Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District. As of April 1st, the military has carried out several aerial bomb attacks, killing 19 people and injuring at least 27 more. Homes have been destroyed and buildings damaged.

These are war crimes. Karen villagers' hopes for peace and a better future have been cruelly snatched away yet again by a despotic and power-hungry military. These attacks have already forced around 3,000 Karen refugees² to attempt to flee across the border into Thailand and they are gathered in a number of places from the northernmost border point to the southernmost border point, while at least 20,000 villagers remain internally displaced in the Salween Peace Park, hiding for their lives in the mountain forests.

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-karen-idUSKBN2BJ0IZ>

² https://www.knuhq.org/admin/resources/statements/pdf/Mutraw%20Statement%20Airstrikes%20March%202030_Eng.pdf

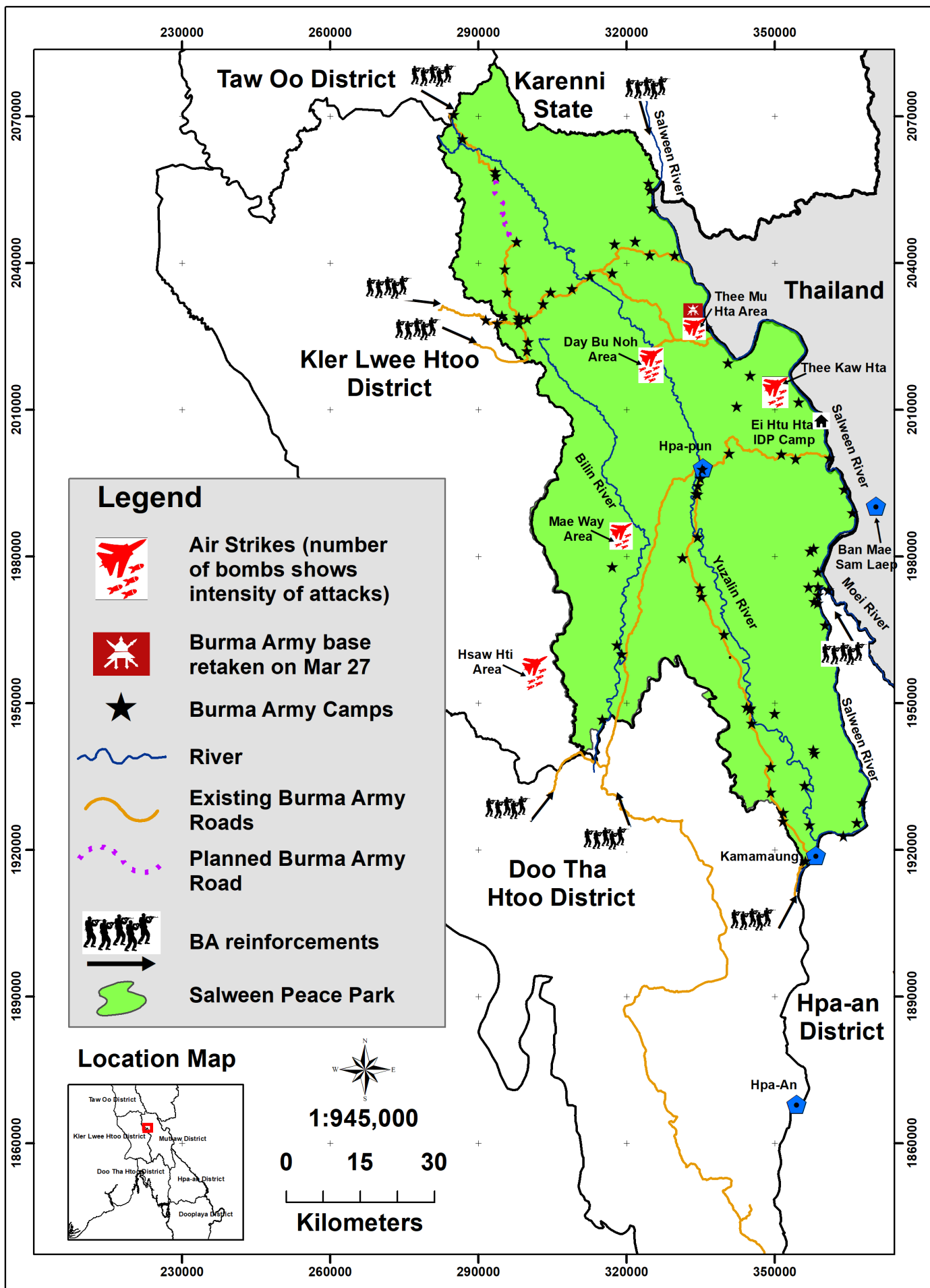


Date	Airstrike targets*	Details
27 th March 2021	Day Bu Noh	Helicopter surveillance was carried out before airstrikes launched in the evening with bombs and automatic gunfire from aircraft. Estimated 3,000 people flee to the Thai border. Deaths (3) Injured (9)
28 th March 2021	Klo Baw Ta (Day Bu Noh area) Ta Kaw Toh Baw (Day Bu Noh area) Thee Mu Hta Thee Kaw Hta Day Bu Noh	Houses destroyed and burnt. Some refugees try to cross over into Thailand. Deaths (2) Injured (3)
29 th March 2021	Ler Htoo Poe (high school) (Mae Way area) Day Bu Noh and other nearby areas along the Salween River Mae Wa area KNLA 15 battalion base (Day Bu Noh)	A high school was completely destroyed. Some refugees who arrived in Thailand were sent back into Karen state. Deaths (3) Injured (6)
30 th March 2021	Htee Pa Doh (Kler Lwee Htoo) Gold mining area in Shwekyin Township (Kler Lwee Htoo) Khaw Poe Khee (Mae Way area) Mae Kaw Law (Mae Way area)	Some refugees have been allowed to enter the Thai side of the border. Deaths (11) Injured (9)
31 st March 2021	Day Bu Noh	School and hospital destroyed
1 st April 2021	Kler Per Hta village (Mae Way area)	Airstrike in the early hours. Casualties unknown

**Airstrikes have occurred in Mutraw district unless specified. Information gathered by KESAN media team*

These attacks come after four months of intensifying Burmese artillery assaults on Karen villages in territories held by the Karen National Union (KNU) and its armed wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), in both Mutraw and Kler Lwee Htoo Districts. When the military staged a coup d'état on February 1st, their ongoing artillery attacks on Karen villages had already forced more than 5,000 Karen villagers to flee. For Indigenous Karen people who bear the trauma of decades of violent conflict and human rights abuses, the current attacks represent their worst nightmares. Since 2016, they have been developing the Salween Peace Park. They dreamt and believed there would be peace in the future, and they were busy doing their part to build that future. Now the Burmese military is bombing the Salween Peace Park.

Map of recent airstrikes in Northern Karen State





Daw Goo Hta high school destroyed in the recent airstrikes in Ler Htoo Poe

Salween Peace Park: Grassroots Democracy, Peacebuilding, and Conservation in Action

The idea for an Indigenous Karen-led protected area in Mutraw District first arose in 1995, when local KNU leaders recognized the value of protecting their ancestral lands, waters, forests, and wildlife for the future. However, at the time, Mutraw was caught in one of the many waves of Burmese military violence to engulf the region since the 1950s. As villages burned and people fled into the forest or to the Thai border, the vision for a Karen protected area remained a distant dream.

Then came a preliminary ceasefire agreement in 2012 and the so-called Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015. The people of Mutraw distrusted the military's intentions after suffering decades of violent displacement, forced labour, torture, rape, and murder of civilian villagers by Burmese soldiers. Despite their misgivings, Karen leaders and communities in Mutraw not only dared to believe that peace and a better future were possible; they also set about building that future by collectively exercising their inherent rights of self-determination.

The Salween Peace Park represents Karen communities' grassroots vision for peace, democratic governance, and protection of the land, water, forest, and wildlife. This is one of the richest forest ecosystems remaining in Southeast Asia, home to numerous threatened and endangered species including gibbons, leopards, and tigers. These species and their habitats are protected by Karen villagers in a network of wildlife sanctuaries, reserved forests, community forests, and Indigenous Karen Kaw territories that comprise the Salween Peace Park.



The second annual Salween Peace Park General Assembly meeting in 2020, with elected representatives from all communities of the peace park.

Although sporadic Burmese military attacks continued in Mutraw throughout the ceasefire period, local people hung on to hope as they continued laying foundations for the Salween Peace Park. Even in April 2018 when Burmese soldiers murdered Indigenous Elder and community leader Saw O Moo³, the people of the Salween Peace Park vowed to keep his vision of an Indigenous Karen protected landscape alive. Together, they discussed and debated every aspect of the Salween Peace Park, including the boundaries, laws, and governance structure, which ensure gender parity and meaningful local representation from all communities across the peace park.

December 18th, 2018 was a day the people of Mutraw District had long been waiting for. After more than two years of extensive public consultation and a referendum of the park's 70,000 inhabitants, Mutraw District KNU and local villagers officially presented Salween Peace Park to the world⁴. The peace park stood as a beacon to promote interethnic cooperation, Indigenous-led conservation, and a better future for all people and all living things in Burma.

The Salween Peace Park is part of a growing movement for Indigenous-led protected and conserved areas, known internationally as Territories of Life, or ICCAs. In 2020, the Salween Peace Park was awarded the Equator Prize⁵ by the United Nations Development Programme, while the chairperson of the park's governing committee, Saw Paul Sein Twa, was presented with the Goldman Environmental Award⁶.

3 <https://khrgr.org/2018/06/18-3-nb1/karen-community-leader-saw-o-moo-was-murdered-tatmadaw-forces-hpapun-districtapril>

4 <http://kesan.asia/celebrating-the-salween-peace-park-proclamation/>

5 <https://www.equatorinitiative.org/2020/06/04/salween-peace-park/>

6 <https://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/paul-sein-twa/>

Attacking an Indigenous Peace Park: The Burmese Military's Betrayal of Peace

Yet even as international awards and recognition were showered on the Salween Peace Park, the cloud of military occupation continued to hang over the area. The Salween Peace Park is committed to demilitarization while ensuring the security of Indigenous Karen people in their own ancestral territories. Villagers have held numerous peaceful demonstrations to demand an end to military occupation and the murder of Karen civilians such as Naw Mu Naw, who was brutally gunned down in her own home by Burmese soldiers on July 16th, 2020⁷. Coordinated demonstrations on December 30th drew more than 10,000 Salween Peace Park community members⁸. Following the military's coup d'état on February 1st, 2021, thousands of people in the Salween Peace Park held demonstrations expressing solidarity with anti-coup protestors while reiterating Karen aspirations for equality, self-determination, peace, and communal harmony.

More than anything, the people of Mutraw long to live on their own ancestral lands in peaceful co-existence with other ethnic peoples and communities in Burma. The peace park offers a way to build true peace, reconciliation, and a shared future.

However, the Burmese military has never shown an interest or commitment to building peace or demilitarizing Karen lands. Since 2010 and especially since 2018, throughout Burma's so-called transition to democracy, the military intensified efforts to expand military infrastructure throughout Karen territories. They have fortified their military bases and roads while expanding into areas controlled by the KNU/KNLA, in explicit violation of the NCA.

In Mutraw District alone, there are more than 80 Burma Army outposts. Since the bilateral ceasefire was signed in 2012 and the NCA in 2015, the KNU has repeatedly requested the peaceful withdrawal of some of these bases so that displaced Karen villagers can return to cultivate their lands in safety. However, the Burma Army has refused both the calls of the KNU/KNLA and the



Karen communities demanding that the Burmese military leave their territories



People seeking shelter under a rock after fleeing air-strikes in Day Bu Noh (photo: Free Burma Rangers)

⁷ <https://khrgh.org/2020/07/statement-killing-naw-mu-naw-two-tatmadaw-soldiers>

⁸ <http://karennews.org/2020/12/10000-karen-villagers-protest-demand-burma-army-withdraws-and-stop-its-road-building-through-indigenous-lands/>

peaceful demonstrations of Karen villagers. Instead, the Burma Army has continued its attempts to violently impose its will on Indigenous Karen territories, including the Salween Peace Park.

On December 1st, 2020, the KNLA released a statement⁹ urging the Burma Army to withdraw by the end of December from new military camps in Mutraw District, including some located directly inside Karen villages where they are a security threat to local villagers. However, the military refused. Burma Army troops began escalating offensives in civilian areas, firing heavy artillery into villages and surrounding farmland. The KNLA has thus been forced to take action to protect the villagers and defend Karen people's Indigenous territories.

Fighting continued to spread in Mutraw and Kler Lwee Htoo Districts throughout the month of January. Then came the coup on February 1st. On February 20th the KNU and other NCA signatories formally ended peace negotiations and vowed to resist the illegitimate junta¹⁰. The Burmese military continued their brutal and indiscriminate attacks on protestors and civilians across the country. The junta has arrested over 2,000 people and several detained people have been tortured and killed. Over 550 people have been killed by the terrorist military since the coup, and many more have been injured. Internet and communications have also intermittently been cut across the country, banks closed, and financial transactions carefully monitored.

Indigenous Communities Under Attack from the Military Junta

On March 27th, Burma's National Armed Forces Day, military thugs murdered more than 140 people in their homes and on the streets across Burma, leading the Special Advisory Council on Myanmar to declare that the military is "nothing more than an armed terrorist group."¹¹ On the same day, Burma Air Force jets began their campaign of terror in the Salween Peace Park and surrounding areas. They have bombed villages, schools, and churches. Villagers who had just begun rebuilding their lives and laying a foundation for lasting peace are fleeing, traumatized, into the forests and mountains.

Meanwhile, Burma Army ground troops are advancing on the Salween Peace Park from several directions, intent on seizing control over Indigenous Karen territories. Once again, Karen villagers are facing the traumas of violent conflict. Aerial bombing has killed at least 19 people and critically wounded more than 27. Thousands of internally displaced persons have sought rudimentary shelter in the forest and in rock crevices. Some have begun digging underground bunkers. The IDPs only cook when cold morning mists obscure the fire's smoke. Even during the cold night, they dare not light a fire for fear of attracting the terror from the skies.

Devastatingly, the Burma Army and Air Force assaults have shattered Indigenous Karen villagers' hopes and dreams for peace once again. These attacks threaten to unravel many years of hard work demarcating Indigenous Kaw territories, establishing community forests and wildlife sanctuaries, and developing a representative grassroots governance framework for the Salween Peace Park.

9 <https://www.knuhq.org/admin/resources/statements/pdf/KNLA%20statement.pdf>

10 <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmar-military-not-eaos-only-terrorist-organisation-in-myanmar-crph-says?page=3&width=500&height=500&inline=true>

11 <https://specialadvisorycouncil.org/media-1>

Threat of Military Development in the Salween Peace Park

The Salween Peace Park was conceived by the Indigenous Karen people as an alternative to militarized extractive development. The Burma Army has long coveted what is now the Salween Peace Park as a site for mining and other destructive industries. Since the early 2000s, there have been numerous schemes to construct hydroelectric dams on the Salween River, which still remains as the longest free-flowing river remaining in Southeast Asia. One of these, the proposed Hatgyi Dam, has caused many armed clashes over the years as the Burma Army and allied militias have attempted to seize control around the site.

Military development schemes including dams, mining, and logging would destroy the environment of the Salween Peace Park for the people of Mutraw and for diverse and rare wildlife that call this place home. Without effective community-based governance of the Salween Peace Park, an ecosystem of global conservation importance will be destroyed.

The Indigenous Karen people of the Salween Peace Park wish to live on their ancestral lands in peace. Karen people want to protect their lands, their culture, and their way of life. After decades of enduring conflict and crimes against humanity committed by the Burmese military, Karen communities are in the process of building an ambitious and hopeful vision of peace, self-determination, and preservation of their Indigenous way of life which depends on the integrity of the rich natural ecosystems in Kawthoolei (Karen State).

The Salween Peace Park is the Indigenous Karen people's gift to the world. The brutal attacks of the Burmese military junta threaten the lives of people throughout Burma, including in Karen State. These attacks also violate the Salween Peace Park's core principles of peace and self-determination, ecological integrity, and cultural survival.



Villagers gathered along the banks of the Salween River after being forced back by the Thai Army