

SITUATION UPDATE:

# Grave Protection Concerns in Myaing Gyi Ngu IDP sites, Karen State

| January 2024 |

# Contents

<b>Current Situation</b>	<b>3</b>
Background	5
<b>Protection Concerns</b>	<b>7</b>
Forced Labour	7
Gender-Based Violence	7
Forced Recruitment of Children	7
Corruption and Aid Diversion	7
Religious Restrictions and Discrimination	7
<b>Response Implications</b>	<b>8</b>
Access Restrictions	8
Challenges for protection programming	8
<b>Forecast</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Key Recommendations</b>	<b>9</b>

## Current Situation

Before the 2021 military coup, Myaing Gyi Ngu was the largest IDP site in Southeast Myanmar, home to an estimated 5,000 people displaced due to fighting that broke out between the Tatmadaw, Border Guard Forces (BGFs), and Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA) splinter group in 2016. IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu faced a situation of protracted displacement, unable to return to their villages of origin due to extensive landmine contamination, the presence of multiple armed actors, and livelihood challenges.<sup>1</sup> Local media and civil society organisations have reported serious protection issues in Myaing Gyi Ngu displacement sites since their establishment in 2016.<sup>2</sup> The vulnerabilities of these displaced populations have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalation in fighting following the military coup, which has made it increasingly difficult for civil society organisations to access IDP sites in Myaing Gyi Ngu. Following the escalation of fighting in Hpapun Township in 2022, the number of IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu has doubled.<sup>3</sup> The more recently displaced IDPs reportedly live in extremely precarious conditions and lack access to livelihood opportunities, which has led

young people, including minors, to undertake risky journeys to seek employment abroad to support their families. At present, an estimated 10,000 IDPs lack access to comprehensive humanitarian support and critical protection services.

This analytical unit interviewed community members with insights into the conditions in Myaing Gyi Ngu IDP sites.<sup>4</sup> They reported grave protection concerns, including forced labour — particularly the recruitment of children by armed actors, and gender-based violence. By shining a light on the human rights violations affecting IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu, and the de facto impunity that powerful actors can enjoy in isolated, hard-to-reach areas, this analytical unit hopes to draw the attention of the international humanitarian sector to dynamics that might arise in other IDP sites, which could become blindspots for the protection sector. As displacement becomes more widespread and entrenched across Myanmar, men, women, and children are increasingly vulnerable to potential abuse by a wide range of actors.

---

<sup>1</sup> Karen Human Rights Group. "Dreaming of Home, Hoping for Peace: Protracted Displacement in Southeast Myanmar." May 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Human Rights Group. "Dreaming of Home, Hoping for Peace: Protracted Displacement in Southeast Myanmar." May 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Karen News. "The Number of Displaced Doubles Since Coup: Myaing Gyi Ngu IDPs Increase to 10,000 As More New Arrivals from Hpa-pun Areas Expected." March 2022.

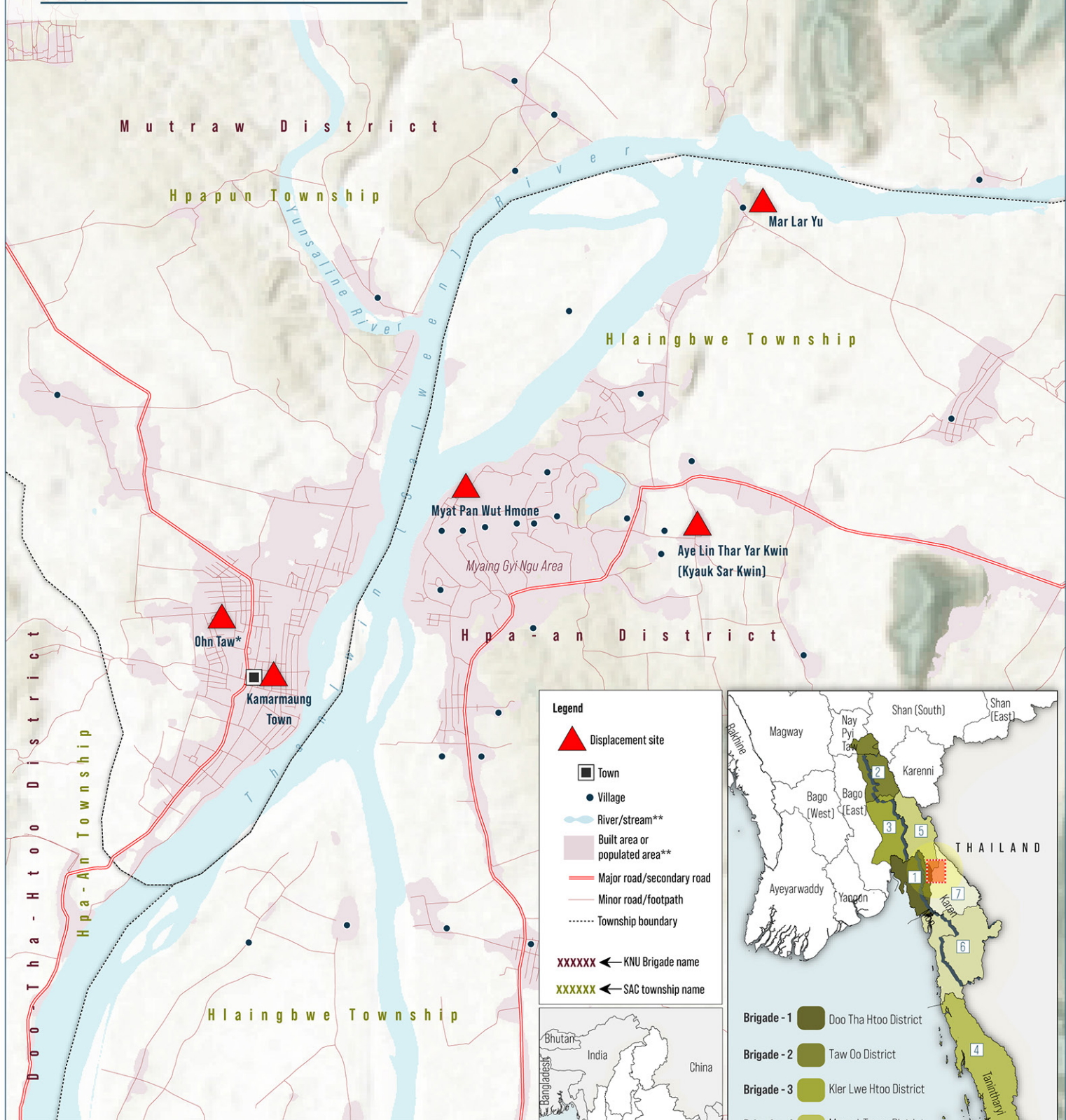
<sup>4</sup> To protect the security of these respondents, this analytical unit has withheld their age, ethnicity, gender, and other identifying information.

# Displacement Overview

Myaing Gyi Ngu Area, Karen State

Southeastern Myanmar

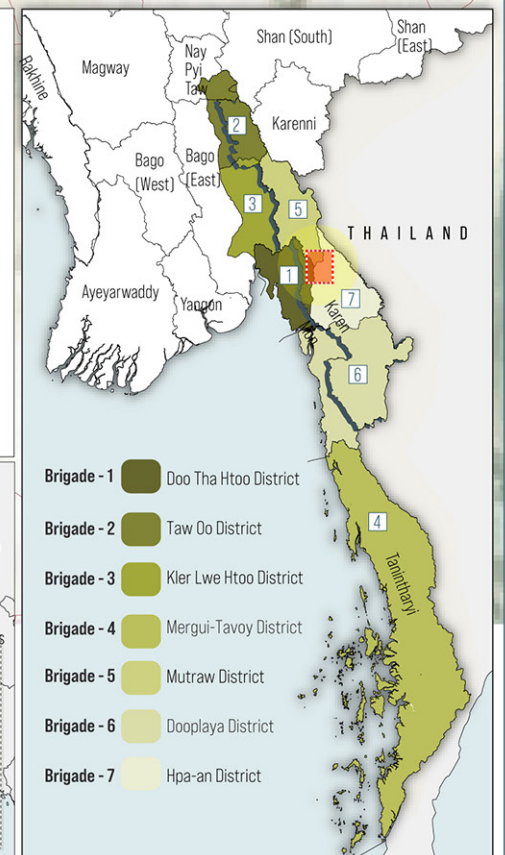
January 2024



**Legend**

- Displacement site
- Town
- Village
- River/stream\*\*
- Built area or populated area\*\*
- Major road/secondary road
- Minor road/footpath
- Township boundary

XXXXXX ← KNU Brigade name  
XXXXXX ← SAC township name



\*Location estimated.

Sources: Karen Human Rights Group and Burma News International

\*\*Source: ESRI ArcGIS; Sentinel-2 10m land use/land cover time series of the world produced by Impact Observatory, Microsoft, and Esri (2022).

Disclaimer: This product is designed for information purposes only. The information on this map should not be considered comprehensive due to the volatile conflict dynamics in Southeastern Myanmar. This analytical unit has done its utmost to verify the location of certain displacement sites, but their geolocations have been manually added and cannot be considered precise.

## Background

Myaing Gyi Ngu became a displacement site in September 2016, when heavy fighting broke out between the Tatmadaw, BGFs, and DKBA splinter group.<sup>5</sup> Civil society organisations have cited the proposed Hatgyi Dam, on the Salween River bordering Hpapun and Hpa-an districts, as a key factor catalysing conflict in the area.<sup>6</sup> Due to the increasing tensions, the prominent monk U Thuzana, who played a key role in the formation of the DKBA,<sup>7</sup> arranged more than 200 cars to transport an estimated 5,000 civilians from villages in the Meh Th'Waw area to Myaing Gyi Ngu.<sup>8</sup>

Since the initial wave of displacement in Myaing Gyi Ngu, civil society organisations have raised concerns about grave protection issues affecting displaced populations. Some of these are related to religious discrimination and restrictions imposed on local communities due to the designation of Myaing Gyi Ngu as a 'pure Buddhist zone' by U Thuzana. Billboards were erected barring Muslim populations from entering Myaing Gyi Ngu town.<sup>9</sup> Local community members and IDPs continue to be subjected to strict rules in Myaing Gyi Ngu, including a ban on the consumption of meat and alcohol.<sup>10</sup> The Karen Human Rights Group documented incidents where civilians were threatened for failing to abide by religious restrictions.<sup>11</sup>



Sign in Myaing Gyi Ngu barring 'non-Buddhist Muslim populations' from entering. (Source: Burma Monitor, Progressive Voice, and Harvard Law School)

IDPs, including children, have reportedly been subjected to forced labour in Myaing Gyi Ngu, to renovate roads and construct religious buildings.<sup>12</sup> U Thuzana and the DKBA exhibited a pattern of repeatedly subjecting civilian populations to forced labour for decades, according to both local and international human rights organisations.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Frontier. "Behind the frontlines, as conflict flares in Kayin State." October 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Karen Human Rights Group. "Dreaming of Home, Hoping for Peace: Protracted Displacement in Southeast Myanmar." May 2019, and Karen Rivers Watch. "Afraid to Go Home: Recent Violent Conflict and Human Rights Abuses in Karen State." November 2014.

<sup>7</sup> U Thuzana is also known as the Myaing Gyi Ngu Sayadaw. He played a key role in the mass desertion of Karen Buddhist soldiers from the Karen National Liberation Army and the formation of the DKBA in 1994. He is also infamous for inflaming religious tensions by banning Muslim communities from entering the 'pure Buddhist zone' established in Myaing Gyi Ngu and instructing his followers to erect stupas near mosques and churches in Karen State. For more information, refer to: Karen News. "RIP - Buddhist Monk - Myaing Gyi Ngu's Sayadaw U Thuzana - 1947-2018." October 2018, and Frontier. "Behind the frontlines, as conflict flares in Kayin State." October 2016.

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

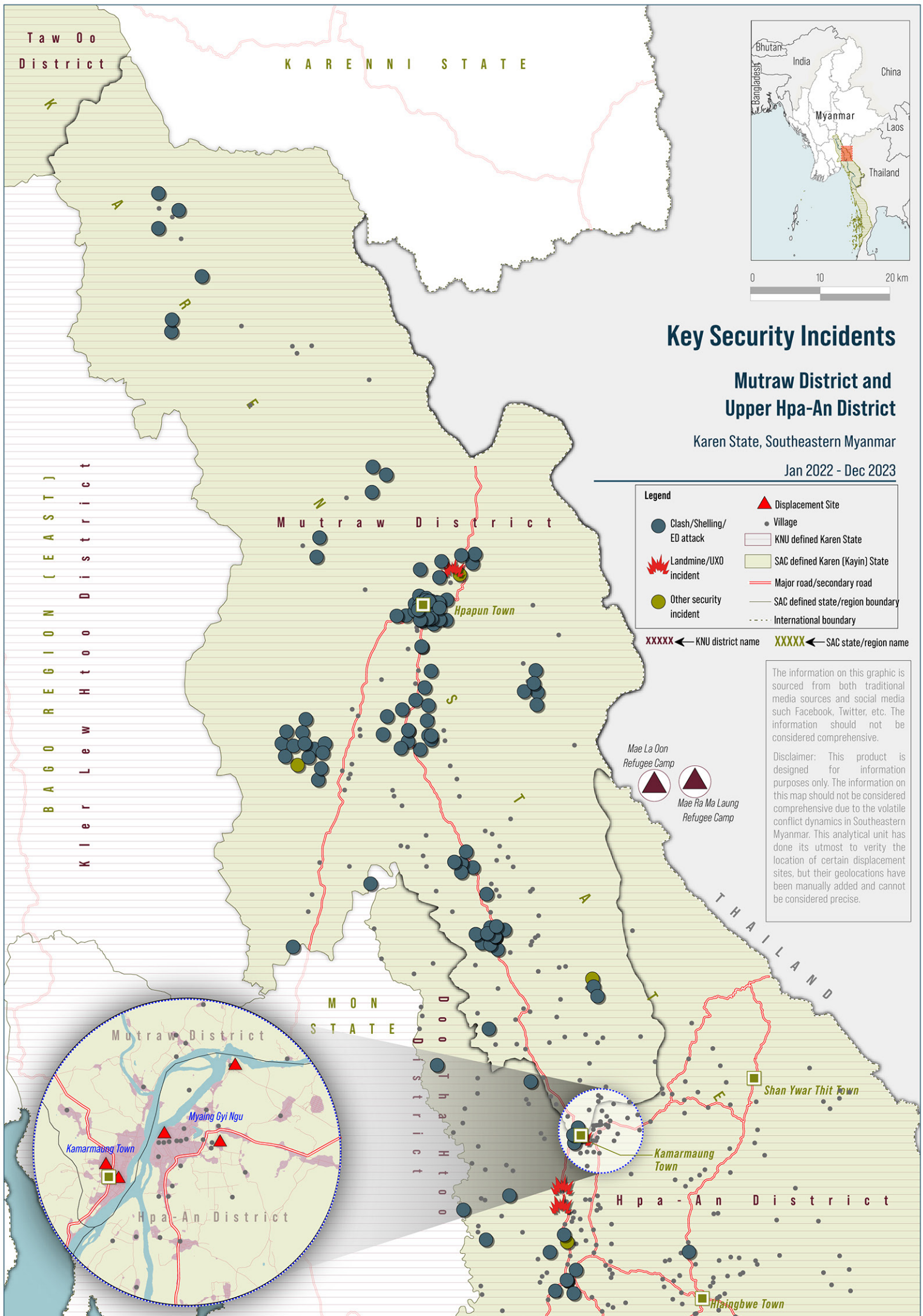
<sup>9</sup> Burma Monitor, Progressive Voice, International Human Rights Law Clinic at Harvard Law School. "Hate Speech Ignited: Understanding Hate Speech in Myanmar." October 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Karen Human Rights Group. "Dreaming of Home, Hoping for Peace: Protracted Displacement in Southeast Myanmar." May 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Karen Human Rights Group. "Hpapun Field Report: Killing, violent abuse, landmine incident, military activity, forced labour, displacement, and poor health and education make villagers feel insecure, January to December 2015." December 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Karen Human Rights Group. "Dreaming of Home, Hoping for Peace: Protracted Displacement in Southeast Myanmar." May 2019, and Frontier. "Myaing Gyi Ngu's uneasy peace in Kayin State." March 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International. "Myanmar. The Kayin (Karen) State Militarisation and Human Rights." June 1999, and Karen Human Rights Group. "Papun Situation Update: Forced labour in Bu Tho Township, January to February 2013." April 2013.



# Protection Concerns

This analytical unit spoke to IDPs and civil society representatives who reported grave protection concerns in Myaing Gyi Ngu, including forced labour— particularly the recruitment of children by armed actors, as well as gender-based violence and religious discrimination. Respondents also highlighted cases of corruption and aid diversion, in addition to cases of misconduct by camp management committees, further detailed in the sub-sections below.

## Forced Labour

Respondents told this analytical unit that IDPs were being subjected to systematic forced labour:

“There are gross violations of human rights in the Myaing Gyi Ngu area. The Myaing Gyi Ngu monk forces IDPs to work constructing a pagoda and paving roads in his area of control. At least one person from every household must work there; otherwise, the household is not allowed to stay in the IDP camp. If an IDP works for a whole month, then the monastery provides a bag of rice. If someone even fails to work for a day, a bag of rice is not given. If an IDP falls sick, another IDP from the household must replace him or her, or they will not get the rice.”

Forced labour shifts reportedly start at 5 AM and continue until the evening, and IDPs have to report to work every day, without a day off until the project is completed.

## Gender-Based Violence

A respondent told this analytical unit that human rights abuses increased in Myaing Gyi Ngu camp following the military coup. This includes the sexual harassment and sexual abuse of displaced women and girls by BGF soldiers, camp management committee personnel, as well as by other IDPs:

“Cases of sexual violence have increased following the coup. There are many incidents of sexual harassment and rapes as the shelters do not have proper doors. Because IDPs have poor awareness of sexual exploitation, sometimes they do not know that they are being sexually exploited.”

## Forced Recruitment of Children

A respondent told this analytical unit about ongoing cases of forced recruitment of IDP children in Myaing Gyi Ngu:

“The BGF recruits children as soldiers when they reach 13 years of age. Children are persuaded to join the BGF for a sack of rice.”

Recruited children are reportedly tasked to work in the BGF military camp. A respondent told this analytical unit that IDPs are incentivised to join the BGF because households with at least one family member serving in the BGF receive more food support.

## Corruption and Aid Diversion

A respondent also told this analytical unit that the camp management committee personnel are corrupt, and are making a profit from reselling goods that had been donated to the IDPs:

“Camp management committees are also SAC allies, so IDPs are afraid to report to them. Sometimes the committee personnel mismanage donations. For example, some of them stole solar panels donated to the IDPs and sold them at local markets.”

## Religious Restrictions and Discrimination

A 2019 report by the Karen Human Rights Group found that three years after their initial displacement, IDPs were extremely food insecure, leading them to scavenge for vegetables in landmine-contaminated areas.<sup>14</sup> According to a respondent, food scarcity and a forced vegetarian diet are leading to widespread malnutrition, disproportionately affecting children.

“In Myaing Gyi Ngu, there is discrimination in the provision of assistance to IDPs. They are forced to be vegetarians and Ma Ba Tha monks threaten Christians and people who practise other religions.”

<sup>14</sup> Karen Human Rights Group. “Dreaming of Home, Hoping for Peace: Protracted Displacement in Southeast Myanmar.” May 2019.



IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu have reportedly been subjected to forced labour, including building pagodas, bridges, and roads. (Source: the Karen Human Rights Group)

## Response Implications

### Access Restrictions

Respondents said that it was difficult for civil society organisations to provide support to IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu due to access restrictions and security concerns relating to the multitude of armed actors operating in the Myaing Gyi Ngu area, including the Tatmadaw and BGF. Some Karen organisations have reportedly been able to provide sporadic support, and local respondents said that the SAC, BGF, and MRCS have also distributed food items to the IDPs.

### Challenges for protection programming

Religious leaders reportedly stopped allowing rights-based activities to be carried out in Myaing Gyi Ngu IDP camp following the 2021 military coup, including human rights awareness sessions as well as training sessions and focus group discussions on gender-based violence. Respondents told this analytical unit that they are not

aware of any organisations able and willing to deliver protection programming in Myaing Gyi Ngu IDP sites, leaving residents there vulnerable to abuse.

Because powerful stakeholders, such as BGF personnel and camp management committee members, are also perpetrators of human rights abuses, IDPs do not feel comfortable sharing this information or seeking support services, leading to an under-reporting of protection incidents:

“Camp management committee members are also SAC allies, so IDPs are afraid to report to them”.

The primarily Buddhist IDPs are also reportedly reluctant to voice concerns relating to human rights abuses given sensitivities linked to the prominence of Buddhist monks in Myaing Gyi Ngu.

## Forecast

Given the risks of an escalation of violence in Karen State, it is likely that there will be an increase in IDPs fleeing to the Myaing Gyi Ngu area. Continuing tensions between armed actors in Southeast Myanmar and extensive landmine contamination will impede any prospects of IDP return or resettlement in the short- and medium-term. The lack of rule of law and the embeddedness of certain armed actors and religious authorities in the Myaing Gyi Ngu area will leave IDPs and local communities vulnerable to serious human rights abuses. Access restrictions will likely continue posing a grave challenge to humanitarian and human rights organisations, including those documenting human rights abuses and delivering protection programming. Protection incidents in the Myaing Gyi Ngu area will continue to be under-reported, and IDP populations will likely lack access to comprehensive protection support services.

## Key Recommendations

1. Given the reports of systematic forced labour — including the forced recruitment of children by armed actors, and gender-based violence, **donors and humanitarian actors should commission a comprehensive needs assessment of displaced persons in Myaing Gyi Ngu, with a focus on identifying protection risks.** This should include a comprehensive analysis of access restrictions on the ground, and an assessment of the actual reach of existing local partners to evaluate whether partnerships with additional local organisations could help fill the gaps in the humanitarian response. Protection actors should also explore pathways to provide assistance to recently displaced IDPs who live in precarious conditions, and to vulnerable displaced persons who have fled Myaing Gyi Ngu IDP sites due to human rights abuses and resettled independently elsewhere.
2. **Donors, international humanitarian organisations, and Karen emergency responders should support an expansion of protection programming in Southeast Myanmar, paying particular attention to extremely vulnerable and isolated communities such as IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu.** They should proactively seek out diverse local partners, including civil society organisations and community-based organisations that may not have previously benefited from funding or partnerships with international humanitarian actors. These actors could fill crucial gaps in protection programming due to their ability to reach certain vulnerable populations that might be difficult for established partners to reach, due to perceived intercommunal tensions, communication challenges, or access restrictions.
3. **Donors and humanitarian actors providing assistance to IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu should undertake a comprehensive investigation of potential corruption and aid diversion, as well as a review of potential misconduct by camp management committees.**
4. **Donors and international humanitarian actors should identify potential avenues to advocate to stakeholders on key protection issues, including the recruitment of children by armed actors and other abuses affecting IDPs in Myaing Gyi Ngu, and other vulnerable and conflict-affected communities throughout Myanmar.**
5. **Donors should consider increasing the funding available for protection programming.** Without increased funding, protection actors would be unable to expand monitoring activities, identify isolated, displaced communities at risk of abuse, or fill critical gaps in protection programming. There is a risk that IDPs in situations of protracted displacement might be overlooked by humanitarian responders who are struggling to respond to the increase in emerging, urgent needs.

