



Shrinking refuge: new threats to refugee security on the Shan-Thai border

Summary

This new report by SHRF and SSRC-TB exposes how security threats from the Burma Army and United Wa State Army (UWSA) are heightening the vulnerability of over 6,000 displaced villagers in camps along the Shan State-Thai border, whose food support was cut by international donors over a year ago.

Despite an existing ceasefire with the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army (RCSS/SSA), the Burma Army has been reinforcing positions around the five Shan IDP camps, building new roads, sending out drones, and on February 2019 fired six 120 mm shells at two IDP locations. Terrified IDPs have been preparing bunkers and carrying out evacuation drills in preparation for further attack.

The UWSA has also been expanding its southern Shan State territories around the IDP camps. In February 2019 Wa troops seized hill fields near Loi Kaw Wan IDP camp in Mong Hsat township, in contravention of a boundary agreement with RCSS/SSA, depriving IDPs of already scarce agricultural land.

The extent of the growing militarization in southern Shan State is highlighted in new SHRF maps, showing hundreds of Burma Army and UWSA outposts thickly dotted around the Shan IDP camps.

Maps also show the extent to which the UWSA has solidified control over its southern territories, to which it forcibly resettled over 120,000 Wa villagers from the north twenty years ago, pushing out indigenous Shan, Akha and Lahu inhabitants – under a divide-and-rule strategy by the former Burmese military regime. Rural subsistence farming communities have been replaced by a sprawl of military garrisons overseeing large mono-crop plantations, mainly producing rubber for export to China.

While all eyes were on the UWSA's 30-year ceasefire celebration on the China border last month, a similar large parade of thousands of troops at their southern headquarters in Huay Aw, Mong Ton – only 15 miles from the Thai border – was a stark reminder of the need to resolve territorial issues in southern Shan State before refugees can return home.

SHRF and SSRC (TB) are calling on foreign donor governments:

1. **To pressure the Burma Army to stop militarization and attacks in all ethnic areas of Burma, so that a new inclusive peace process can begin.**
2. **To urgently resume food aid to IDPs and refugees in camps along the Shan-Thai border until they can return voluntarily, in safety and dignity to their homes in Shan State**

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Introduction

The official Burmese government narrative is that southern Shan State is now peaceful: ethnic armed groups have signed ceasefires and joined the peace process, so refugees can return and development can proceed. This is the narrative underpinning the decision by international donors to cut support for displaced Shan on the Thai-Burma border in October 2017.

The reality is entirely different. Ceasefires are tenuous, the peace process has stalled, and armed clashes and human rights violations are continuing. Meanwhile, the two main causes of displacement in southern Shan State remain unaddressed: the Burma Army's massive scorched earth campaign in 1996-1998, which uprooted over 300,000 people; and the forced resettlement by the United Wa State Army of over 126,000 Wa villagers to southern Shan State in 1999-2001, which pushed out thousands of indigenous inhabitants (under the former Burmese military regime's divide-and-rule strategy).

In August 2017, SHRF produced a report "As conflict escalates in Shan State, aid must not be cut to Shan-Thai border refugees" <https://bit.ly/2WouxwV> describing the humanitarian crisis faced by over 6,000 refugees/IDPs in six camps along the Thai-Burma border, and urging a review of the donor decision to cut food aid to these camps.

One and a half years later, there has been no change in donor policy towards the southern Shan IDP/refugee camps, despite worsening security conditions. The camps are now not even marked on UN and INGO humanitarian maps.

SHRF has therefore compiled this new report to give an update of the security situation in southern Shan State, and explain why the refugees/IDPs in camps along the Shan-Thai border are not only still unable to return home, but now find their already fragile refuge under threat.

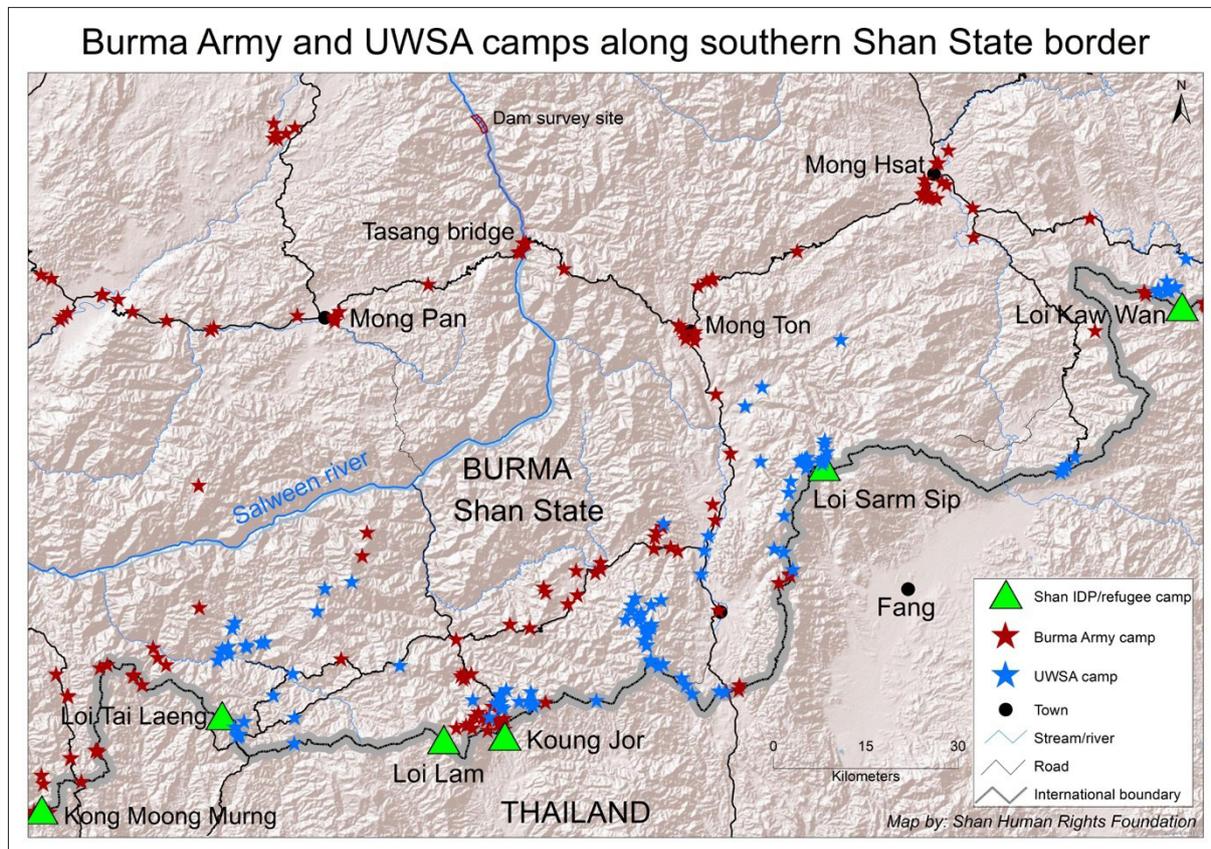
1.

Widespread military build-up along the southern Shan State border

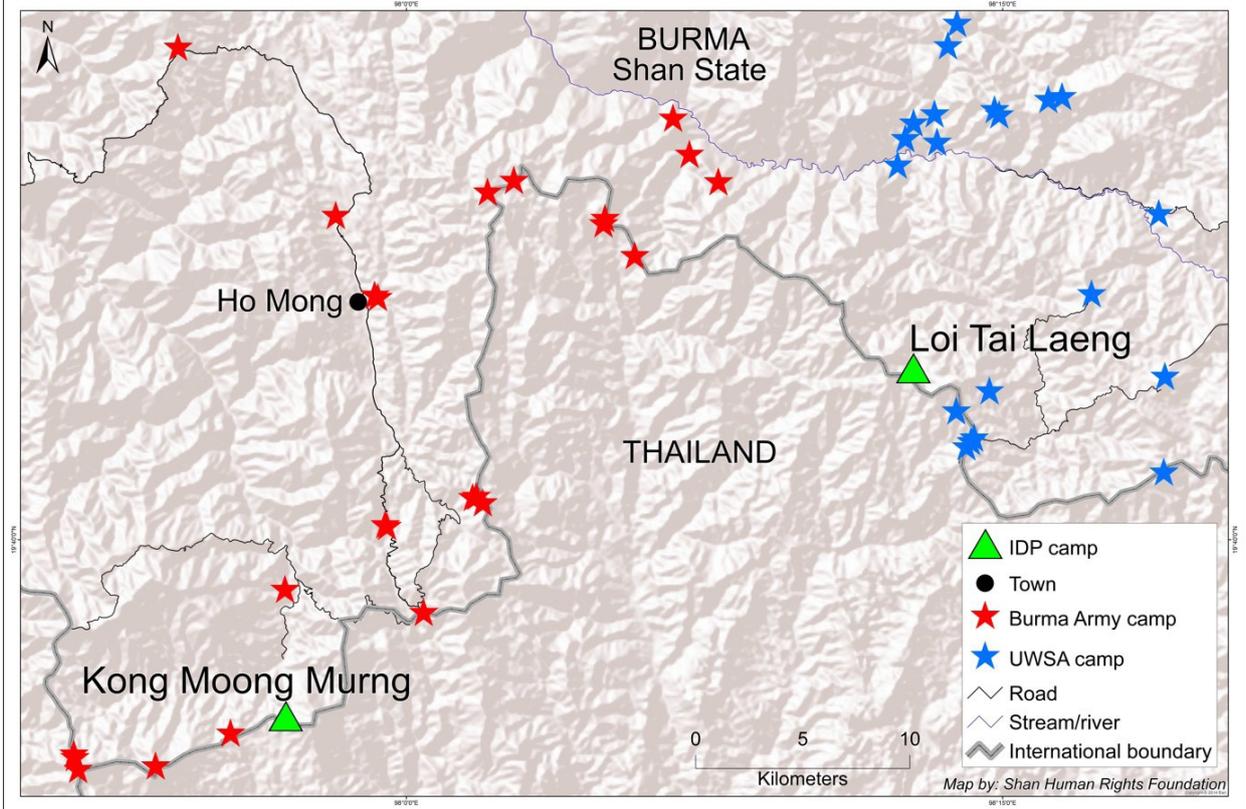
Using data from local sources, SHRF has produced detailed maps of Burma Army and United Wa State Army positions along the southern Shan State-Thai border. They show clearly that the signing of ceasefires by the Restoration Council of Shan State/Shan State Army (RCSS/SSA) since December 2011 has not led to a demilitarization of this border area.

On the contrary, there has been widespread military build-up by both the Burma Army and United Wa State Army (UWSA), who have taken advantage of the ceasefires to move into contested areas near the border, closing in on RCSS/SSA territories where the IDPs are sheltering.

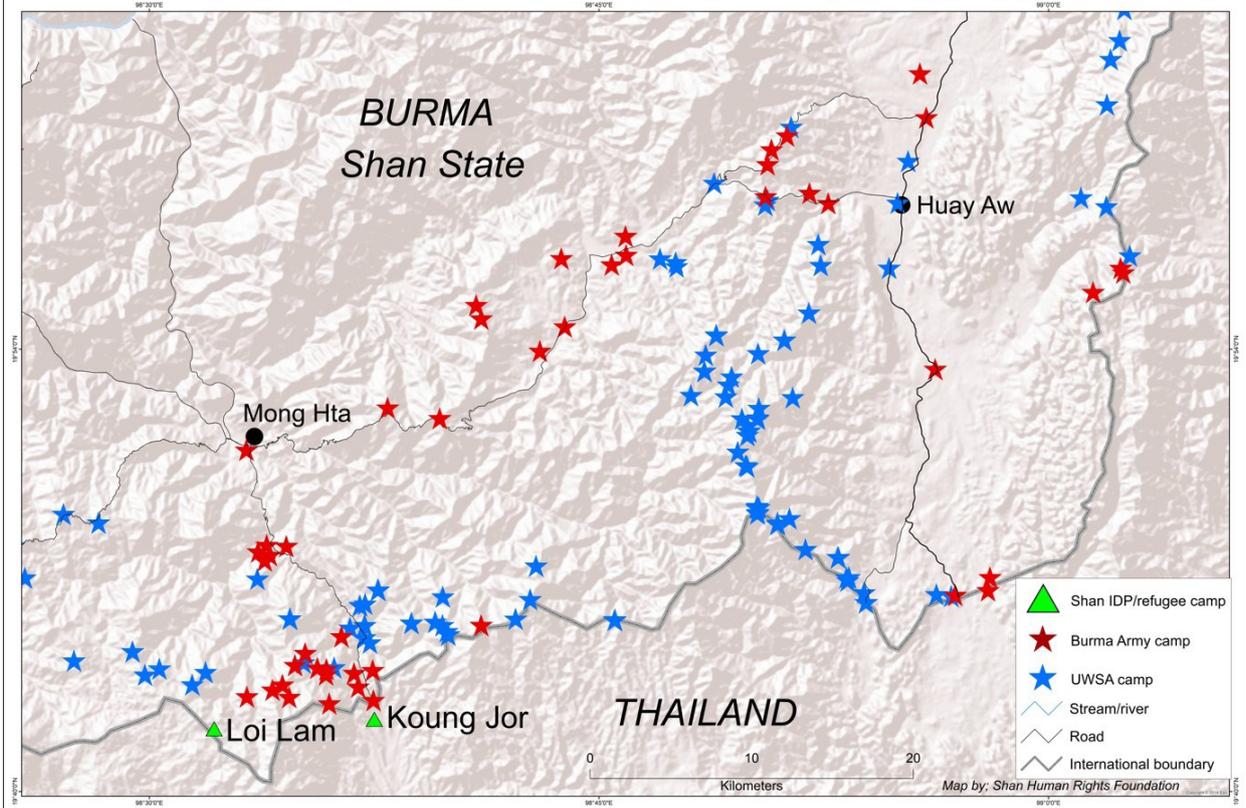
The maps therefore highlight clearly the precarious situation of the IDPs, sandwiched between three armies on one side of the border, and the Thai military on the other.



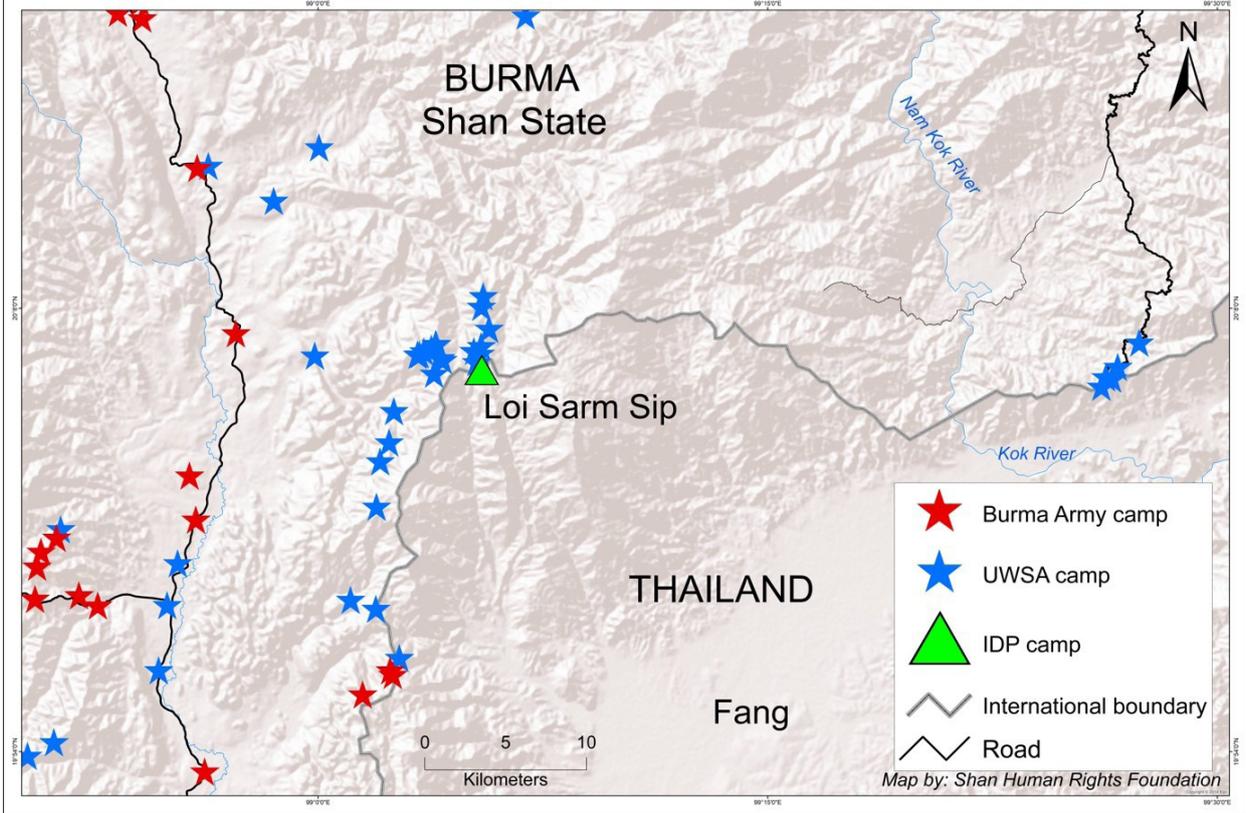
Burma Army and UWSA camps near Kong Moong Murg and Loi Tai Laeng IDP camps



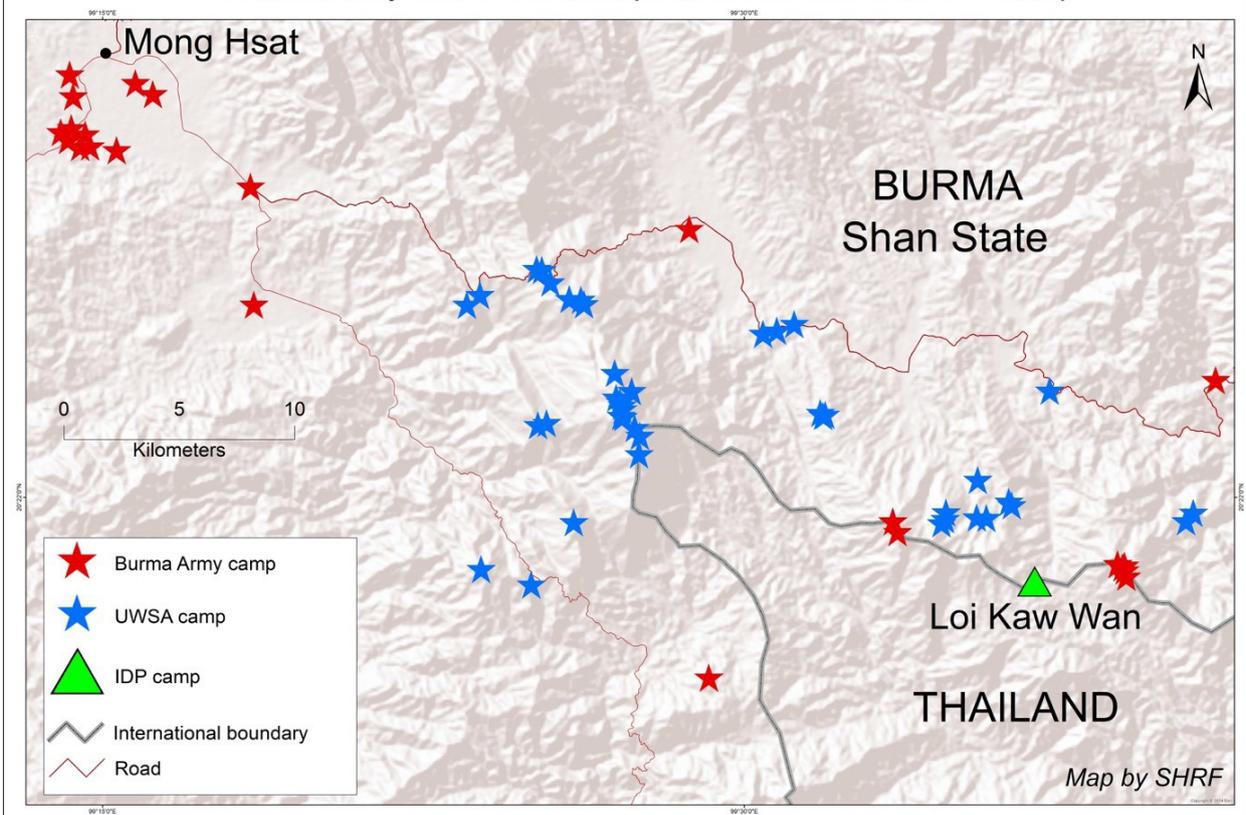
Burma Army and UWSA camps near Loi Lam and Koung Jor IDP/refugee camps



Burma Army and UWSA camps near Loi Sarm Sip IDP camp



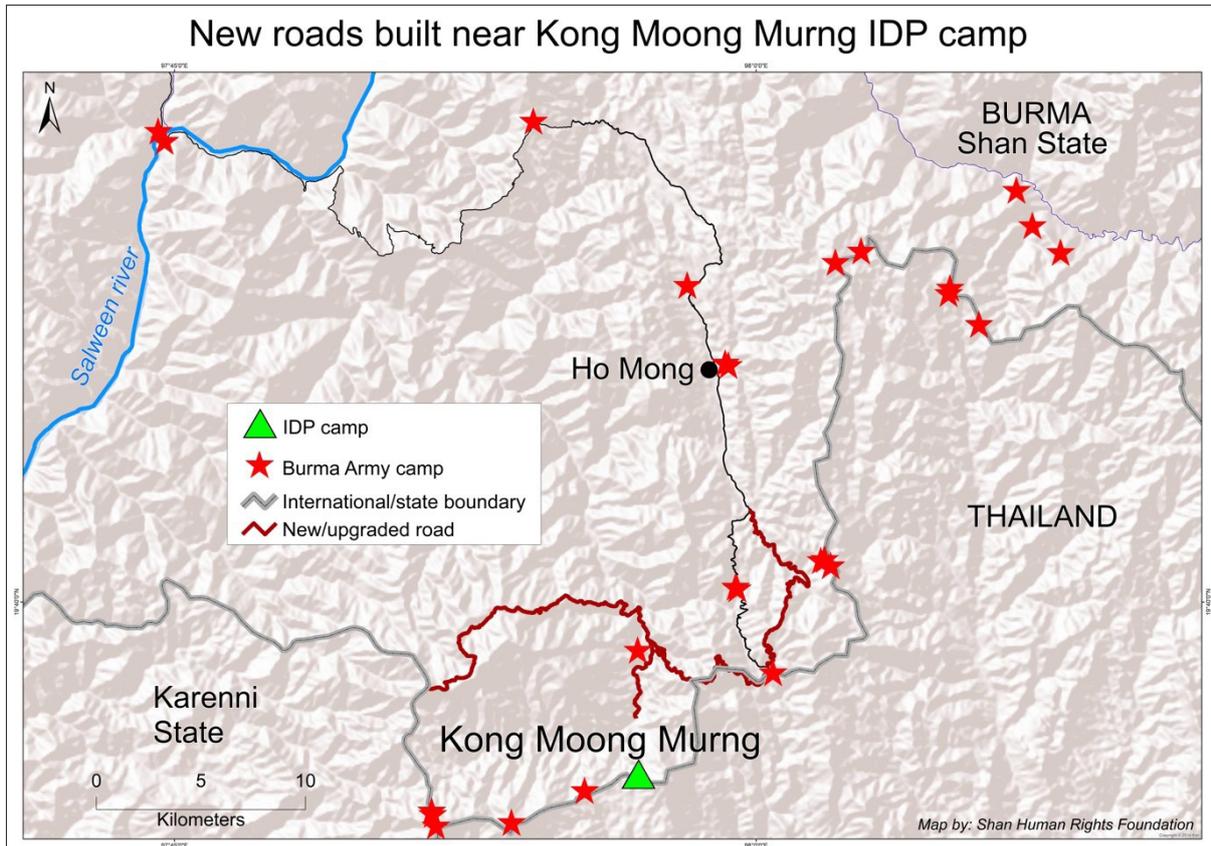
Burma Army and UWSA camps near Loi Kaw Wan IDP camp



2.

New infrastructure closes in

During the past year, new roads have been built in southern Larng Khur, opposite the northern Mae Hong Son border, facilitating supply of frontline Burma Army outposts around Kong Moong Merng IDP camp. These roads will also facilitate quick deployment of troops and supplies during any offensives.



A new bridge has also started to be built over the Salween River between Mong Ton and Mong Pan at Ta Sang, which will be larger and sturdier than the existing bridge. On February 6, 2019, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi herself presided over the ground-breaking ceremony – flanked by Burma Army commanders.

Locals are viewing the new bridge construction with concern, as a sturdier bridge will be better able to carry heavy weaponry. They also suspect that the upgrading of the bridge may be linked to plans to build the giant Mong Ton dam upstream on the Salween.

Last year, Chinese engineers from the Three Gorges Corporation carried out surveys at the Mong Ton dam site carrying out tests under tight security. This giant dam, slated to produce 7000 megawatts of electricity, 90% for export to Thailand and China, will flood vast tracts of land in southern and central Shan State which were depopulated by a massive Burma Army scorched earth campaign in 1996-1998. If the dam is built, tens of thousands of displaced villagers will never be able to return home.



Photo from New Light of Myanmar, Feb 7, 2019

Failed pilot refugee resettlement project in Mong Hta

An indication that the Burmese authorities are not expecting refugees to return anytime soon is the fact that a pilot housing project in Mong Hta for returning refugees is now occupied by Burmese government staff.

Mong Hta, 20 kilometers from the Thai border in southwest Mongton township, was formerly a Shan village in Mong Tai Army (MTA) territory, which prospered from lying on a busy trading route between the Salween River and the Thai border crossing of Lak Taeng.

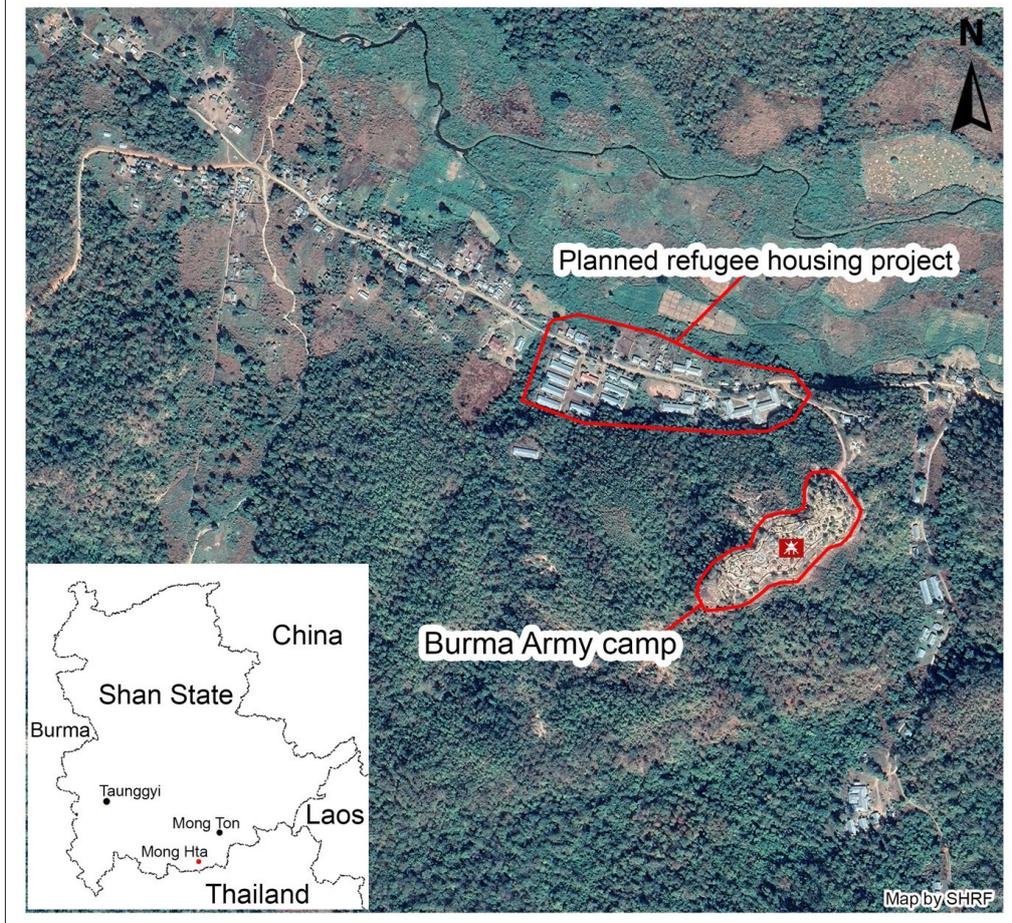
After the MTA surrendered at the end of 1995, the Burma Army took over Mong Hta, causing most of the original inhabitants to flee. When the RCSS/SSA then set up camps along the adjacent border areas, Mong Hta became an important Burma Army frontline stronghold against the RCSS/SSA.

It thus appeared to be a significant concession from the Burmese government in the RCSS/SSA's Union-level ceasefire agreement in January 2012: "To allow RCSS/SSA headquarters in Homein sub-township and Mong Hta sub-township." (Ho Mein/Mong was the former MTA HQ area, about 60 kilometers west of Mong Hta).

However, this agreement was never honored. The Burma Army never retreated from Mong Hta or Ho Mong, and RCSS/SSA was only allowed a small liaison office in Mong Hta.

Despite this, attempts were made by the Burmese authorities to persuade refugees in Thailand to return to Mong Hta. In mid-2012, the Norwegian Refugee Council (working under the Myanmar Peace Support Initiative) visited Koung Jor refugee camp on the northern Chiang Mai border, and informed the camp leader they were planning to fund a pilot housing project for 90 refugees to return to Mong Hta. In July 2013, the Koung Jor camp leader was informed by the military commander in Mong Taw that new housing was being built for returning refugees in Mong Hta. Soon afterwards, some Burmese policemen from Tachileik visited the refugee camp, and asked if the refugees wanted to return to Mong Hta.

Planned refugee housing project in Mong Hta



Since then, about 20 houses, a new school and a hospital have been built in Mong Hta. However, no refugees have dared to return, due to fear of the Burma Army – whose IB 244 camp lies only about 400 meters from the new housing--- and of the landmines strewn around the area.

Today, the pilot refugee housing project is occupied by Burmese government staff working in Mong Hta.



Refugee resettlement project in Mong Hta

3.

Recent signs of Burma Army aggression

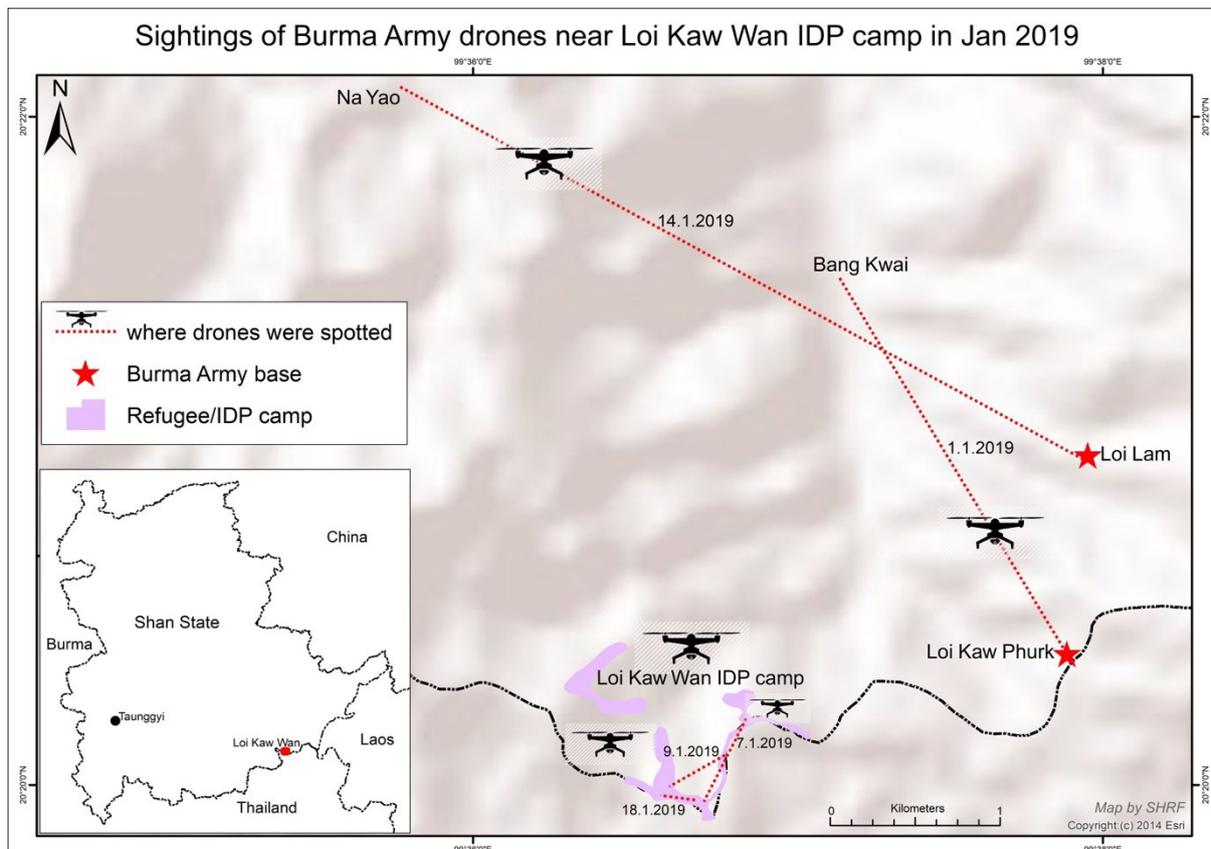
Burma Army sends drones over Loi Kaw Wan IDP camp in Mong Hsat

In September 2018, SHRF reported that the Burma Army flew drones for the first time over Loi Lam IDP camp, during the visit of the Triangle Region Commander to the area.

In January 2019, the Burma Army flew drones from nearby hilltop camps five times over Loi Kaw Wan IDP camp on the Mong Hsat-Chiang Rai border. This caused alarm among the IDPs, who worried this might signal an attack.

The drones were spotted at the following times:

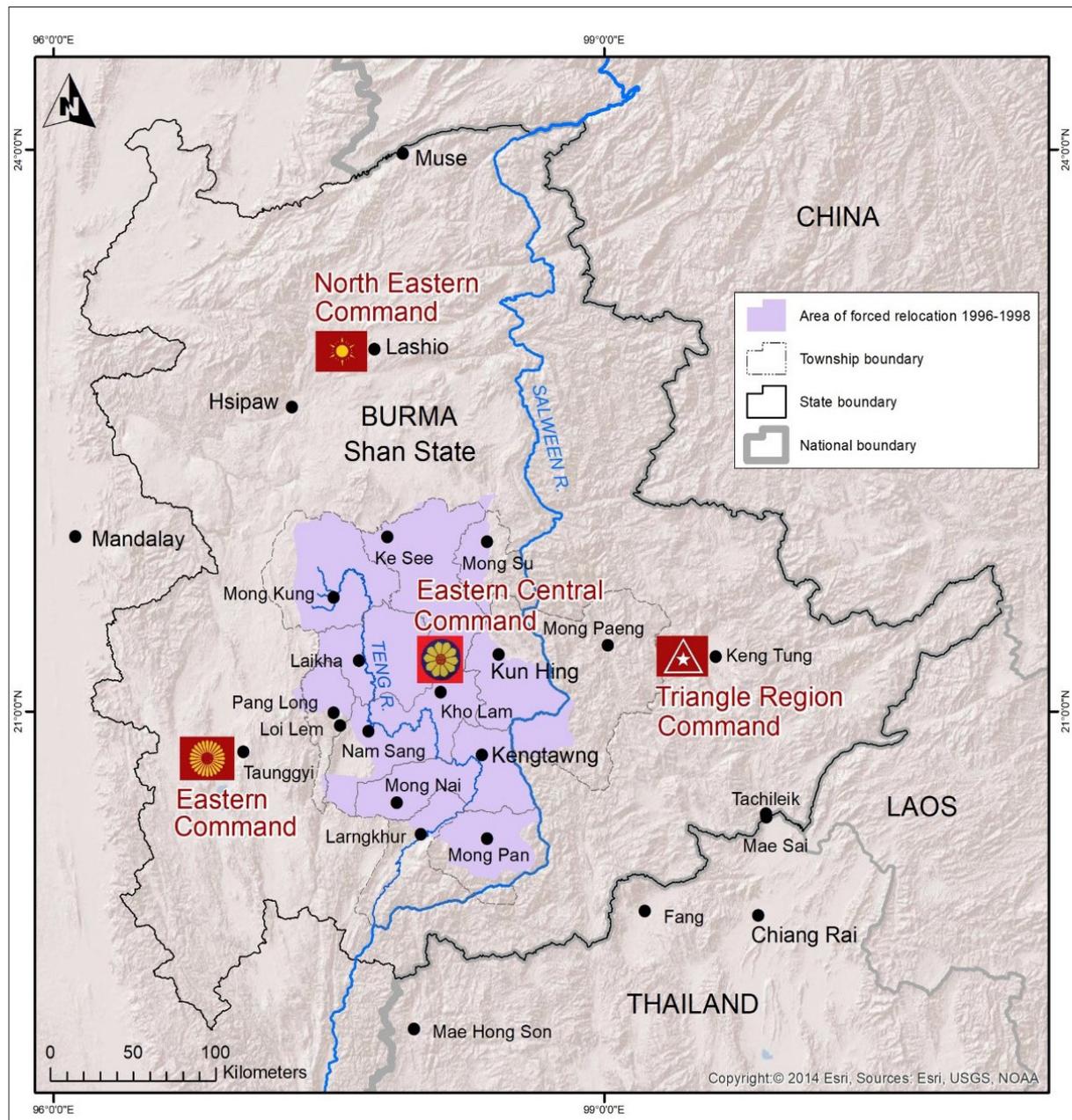
- January 1, 2019, at 17:45 hrs
- January 7, 2019, at 6 am
- January 9, 2019, at 20:35 hrs
- January 14, 2019, at 5 am
- January 18, 2019, at 19:28 hrs



Burma Army fires artillery shells at Loi Tai Laeng and Loi Lam IDP camps

On February 13, 2019, for the first time since the RCSS/SSA signed a bilateral ceasefire in December 2011, the Burma Army fired artillery shells at two RCSS/SSA positions on the Shan-Thai border, causing panic among IDPs in these areas.

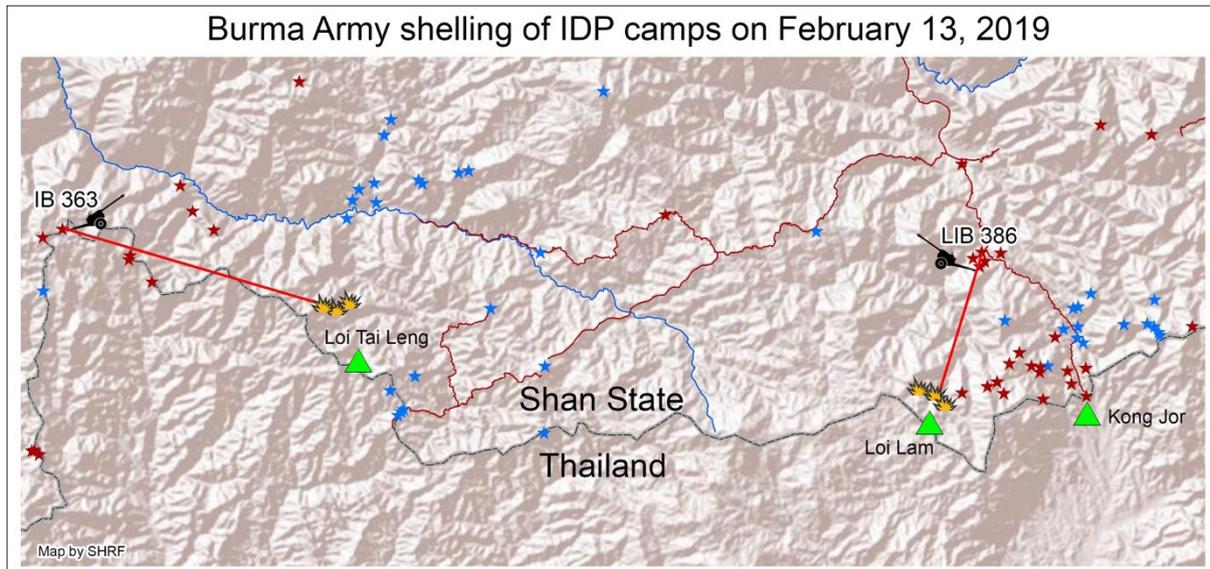
Six artillery shells were fired towards Loi Tai Laeng and Loi Lam from outposts under two separate regional commands: the Central Eastern Regional Command and the Triangle Regional Command.



Burma Army regional commands in Shan State

At 2.40 pm, troops of IB 363, (under the Central Eastern Command) fired one 120 mm shell from their camp at Nam Mae Kun, towards Loi Tai Leng, about ten kilometers away. Just after 6 pm, another two 120 mm shells were fired from the same camp towards Loi Tai Leng.

Meanwhile, at around 5.30 pm the same day, three 120 mm shells were fired from Mong Taw camp (LIB 386 under the Triangle Command) towards Loi Lam IDP camp.



Fortunately the shells landed in forested areas outside the camps, and did not cause any harm, but the IDPs were terrified.

In the following days, IDPs renovated existing bunkers, and prepared their belongings to be ready to flee to the Thai side of the border. Camp committees also organized evacuation drills.



IDPs near bunker in Loi Tai Laeng, Feb 2019

The shelling was direct retaliation for an incident the day before, on February 12, when RCSS/SSA troops confiscated equipment from Burmese military personnel at a security check-point in Mong Paeng, eastern Shan State, over a hundred miles away. The personnel were in civilian clothes, but were armed, leading the RCSS/SSA troops to temporarily confiscate their arms and other equipment, which were handed back to the Burma Army via the RCSS/SSA liaison office in Kengtung a few days later.

The Burma Army order to fire shells was in violation of their own four-month unilateral ceasefire, starting on December 21, 2018, in five regional commands, including the Central Eastern and Triangle regions.



Evacuation drill at Loi Tai Laeng, Feb 2019

Fresh displacement after shelling

On February 19, about a week after the shelling, seven new refugee families arrived at Loi Lam IDP camp. They had fled from the villages of Kiu Kor and Mong Nen, in Burma Army-controlled territory between the border and the Salween River. They had heard the shelling, and were scared that fighting was about to break out. There were altogether nineteen people, of whom five were children under 18, including a seven-day-old baby. They said there was now no one left in their villages.

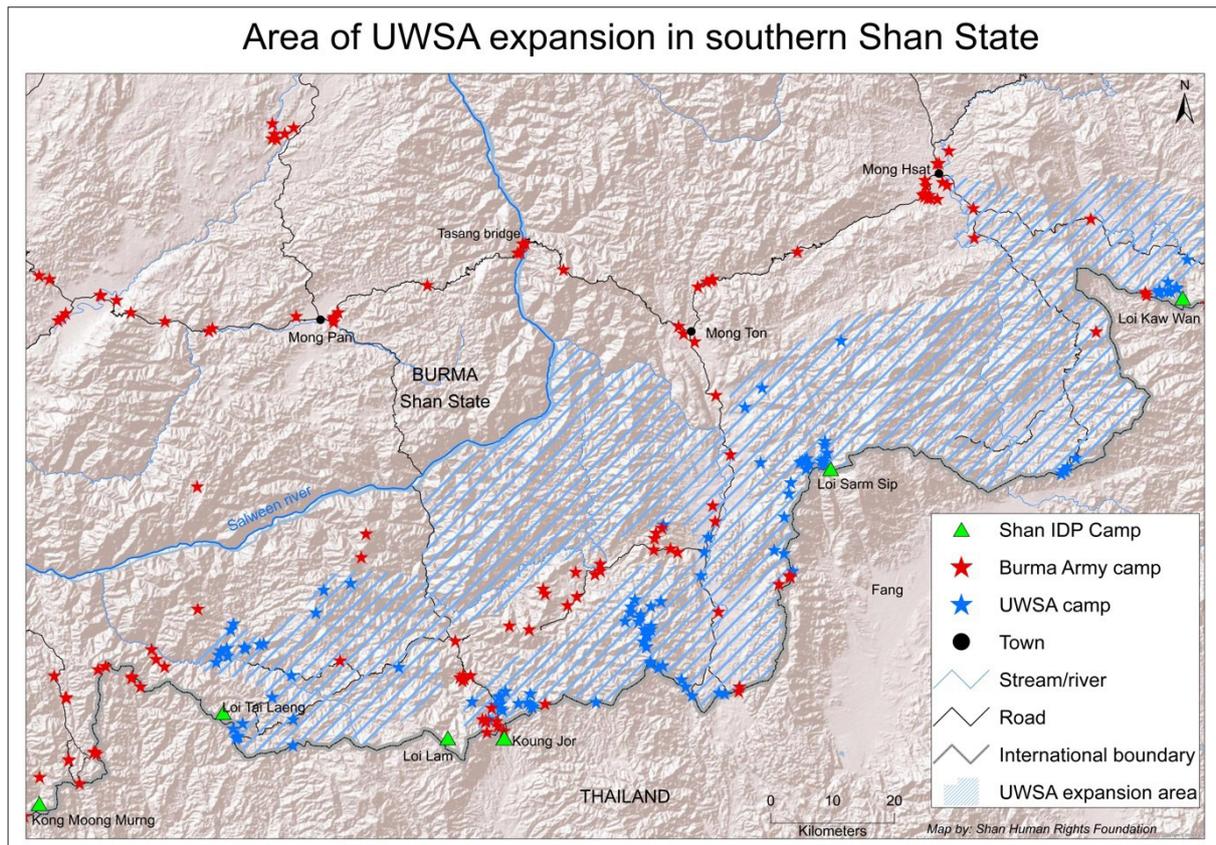


New IDP arrivals at Loi Lam after shelling, Feb 2019

4.

The UWSA digs in along the southern Shan State-Thai border

Since 1999, when the Burmese military regime permitted UWSA to transfer about a quarter of the Wa population – over 126,000 villagers - from northern to southern Shan State, the UWSA has been progressively expanding its territories in southern Shan townships bordering Thailand. The southern UWSA is called the 171 Region.



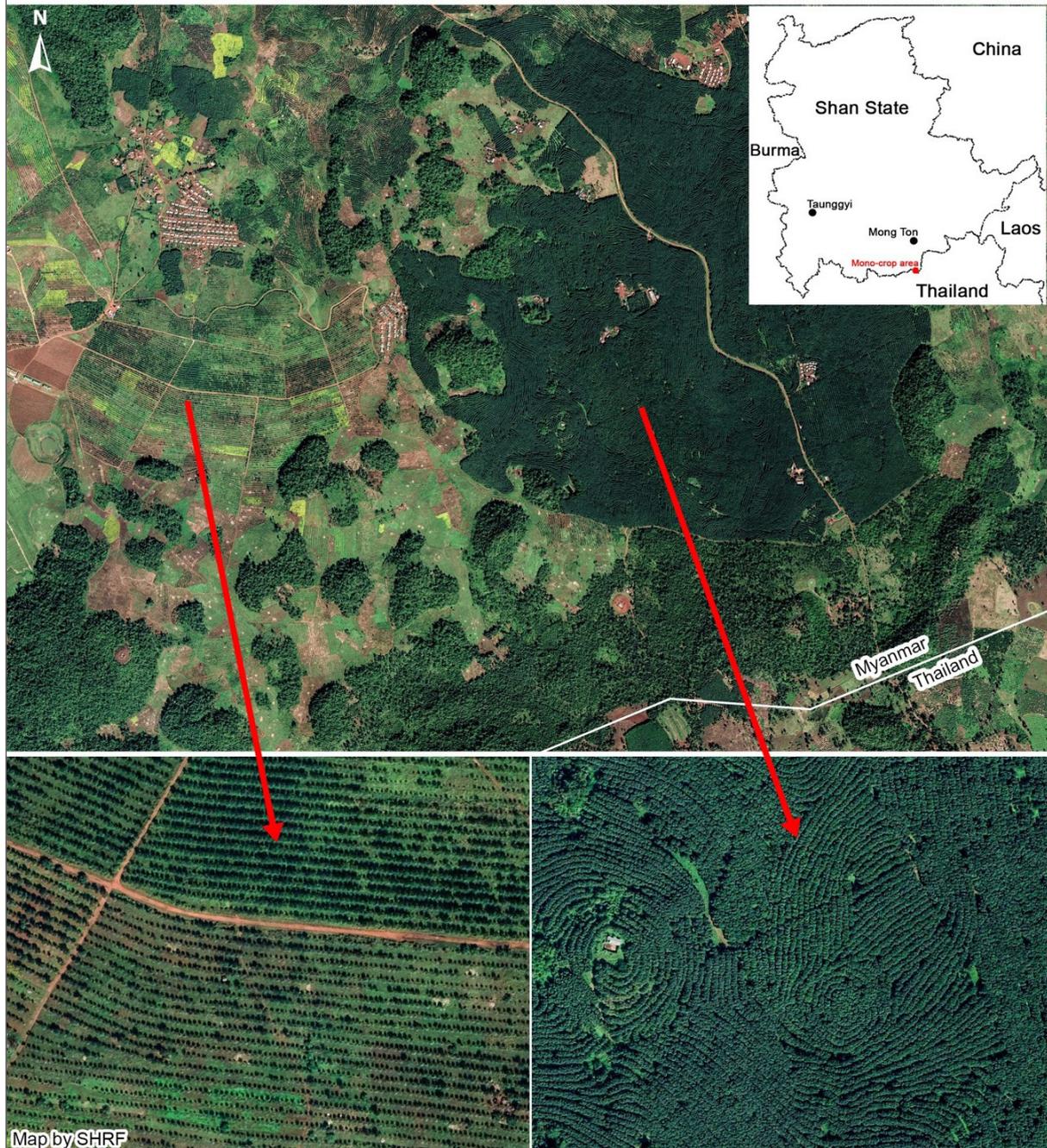
The southern UWSA headquarters is in Huay Aw, southern Mong Ton township, about fifteen miles from the Thai border - halfway along the main road from Border Post 1 at Nong Ook, northern Chiang Mai province, to Mong Ton town, formerly a busy trading route.

Before 1999, the valley was mainly populated by Shan farmers and traders, who lived in villages along the main road to the border. Today, the original Shan villages are surrounded on all sides by fenced and walled-off UWSA settlements and large mono-crop plantations. Water sources have been diverted to these plantations. The nearby hills, where villagers used to forage for firewood, wild plants and other forest products, are now strictly out of bounds. Trespassing Shan villagers are arrested and punished.

Forests along the valley have been clear-felled, and replaced by rubber plantations. The rubber is exported to China.

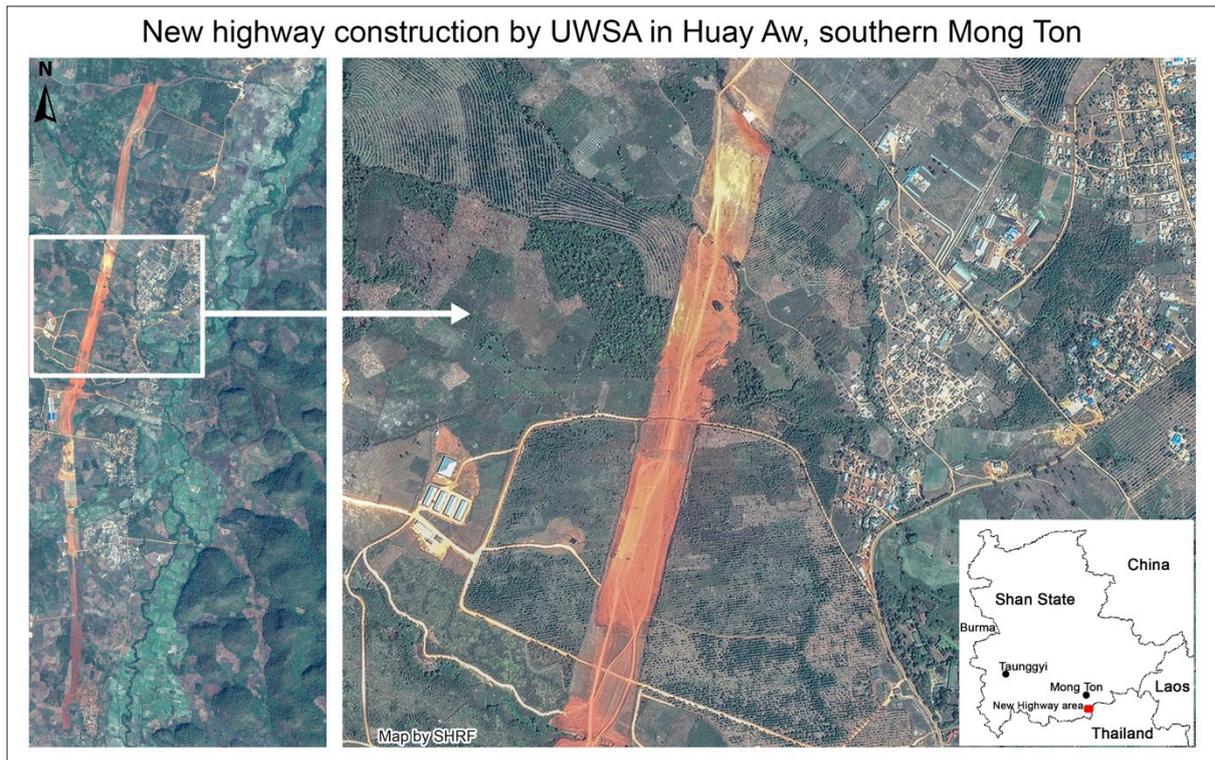
Four years ago, the UWSA began clearing land near Huay Aw for a vast new highway parallel to the existing road to the border. So far, about eight kilometers of land has been cleared.

UWSA mono-crop plantations on the southern Mong Ton-Thai border



One of the sources of local concern about the UWSA's expansion in the Mong Ton area is their declared support for China's Belt and Road Initiative. On February 24, 2017, they issued a joint statement with allied ethnic armed groups stating they would provide security for foreign investments under this initiative. With the Burmese, Chinese and Thai governments pushing ahead with the giant Mong Ton dam on the Salween River, locals fear that the expanded UWSA forces in Mong Ton will serve as security for the planned dam.

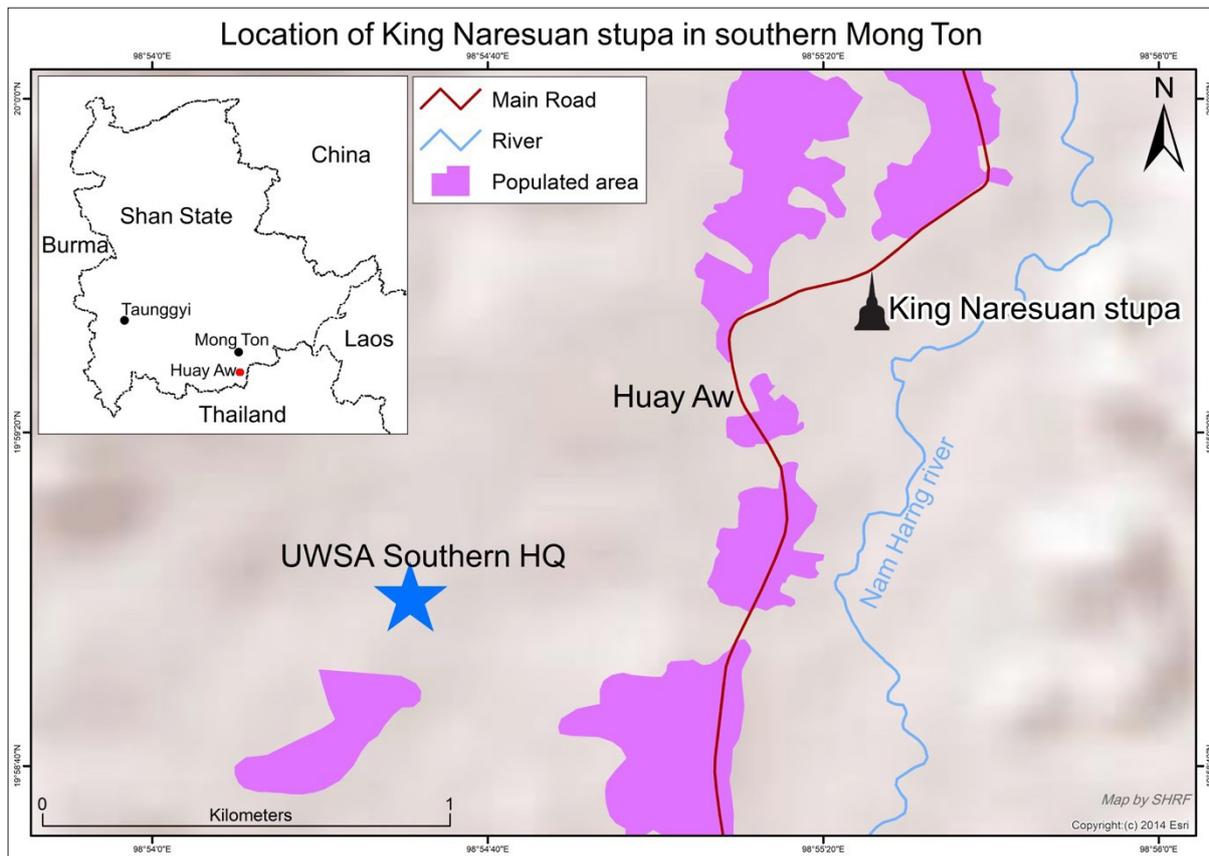
In 2011, three Chinese engineers from the China Three Gorges Project Corporation, and their translator, who were surveying for the planned Mong Ton dam (at that time called the Ta Sang dam) were abducted by an unknown armed group, due to local opposition to the dam. They were released unharmed after three months.



On April 10 2018, a boat on the Salween River carrying militia giving security for Chinese engineers from the China Three Gorges Corporation (CTG) was shot at by unknown assailants. One militia member was killed.

UWSA tries to block construction of Buddhist stupa at sacred site in Mong Ton

A recent sign of tension between the UWSA and local Shan communities was an attempt by Wa authorities to stop the building of a Buddhist stupa at the sacred historical site where the famous Thai King Naresuan died in 1605.



The site lies east of Huay Aw, beside the main road, in an area seized by the UWSA since 1999. There was formerly only a ruined stupa, but the highly revered Shan monk Ven. Khruba Woonchum (well-known in Thailand for having predicted the rescue of the schoolboys trapped in Tham Luang cave in 2018) had visited the site, and arranged for the building of a large new stupa and other temple buildings.

At first, the UWSA authorities gave permission for the construction, and on December 11, 2018, Ven. Khruba Woonchum arrived at the site, together with the Burma Army Triangle Regional Commander Brig-Gen Khin Hlaing, to attend a consecration ceremony for the new building.

Straight after Ven. Khruba Woonchum and Brig-Gen Khin Hlaing had left, the Assistant Commander of the UWSA 171 southern region, Yang Kaw Jong, together with about 50 troops, came and ordered that construction must stop. They used a backhoe to level the base of the stupa and tear down other newly built structures. They also ordered that the statue of Ven. Khruba Woonchum be removed.

Pictures of the leveling of the site and removal of Ven. Khruba Woonchum's statue immediately circulated on the internet, causing shock and outrage among the Shan and Thai public.

According to rumour, the southern UWSA leaders were haunted that night by nightmares of their Huay Aw headquarters being burned to ashes. Whatever the reason, the very next day, UWSA top commanders Yang Kaw Jong and Wei Xueying came to the site, summoned local Shan monks, and said that the building could go ahead as planned. They also offered to provide labour to help with the construction. The only stipulation was that the perimeter of the stupa should measure exactly 171 feet – to correspond to the number of the UWSA's southern region. The stupa construction has proceeded accordingly, and is now half-finished.



UWSA soldiers clearing stupa construction in Mong Ton, Dec 2018

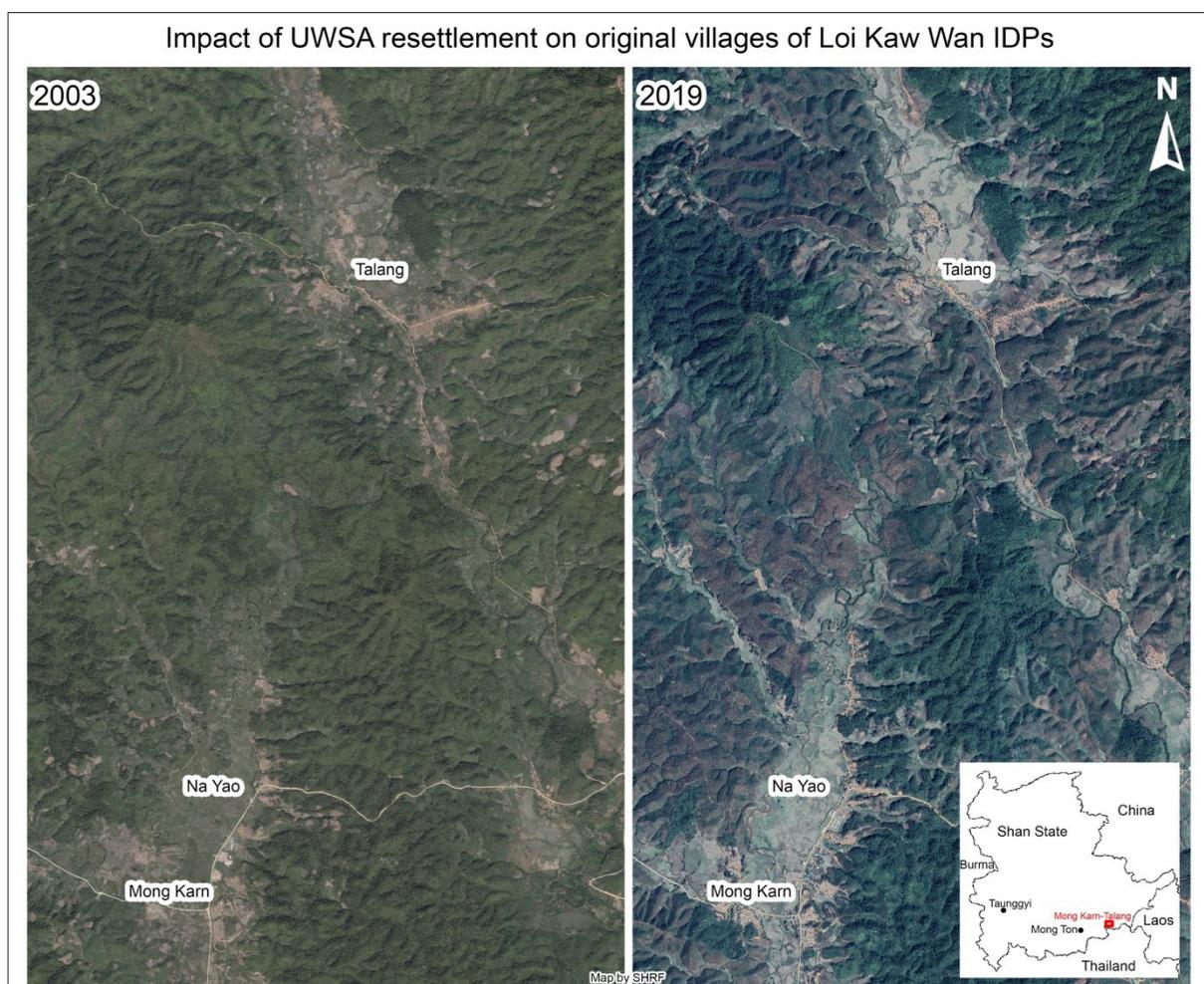


UWSA soldiers removing statue of Ven. Khruba Woonchum in Mong Ton, Dec 2018

UWSA further encroaches on IDP farmlands in Mong Hsat

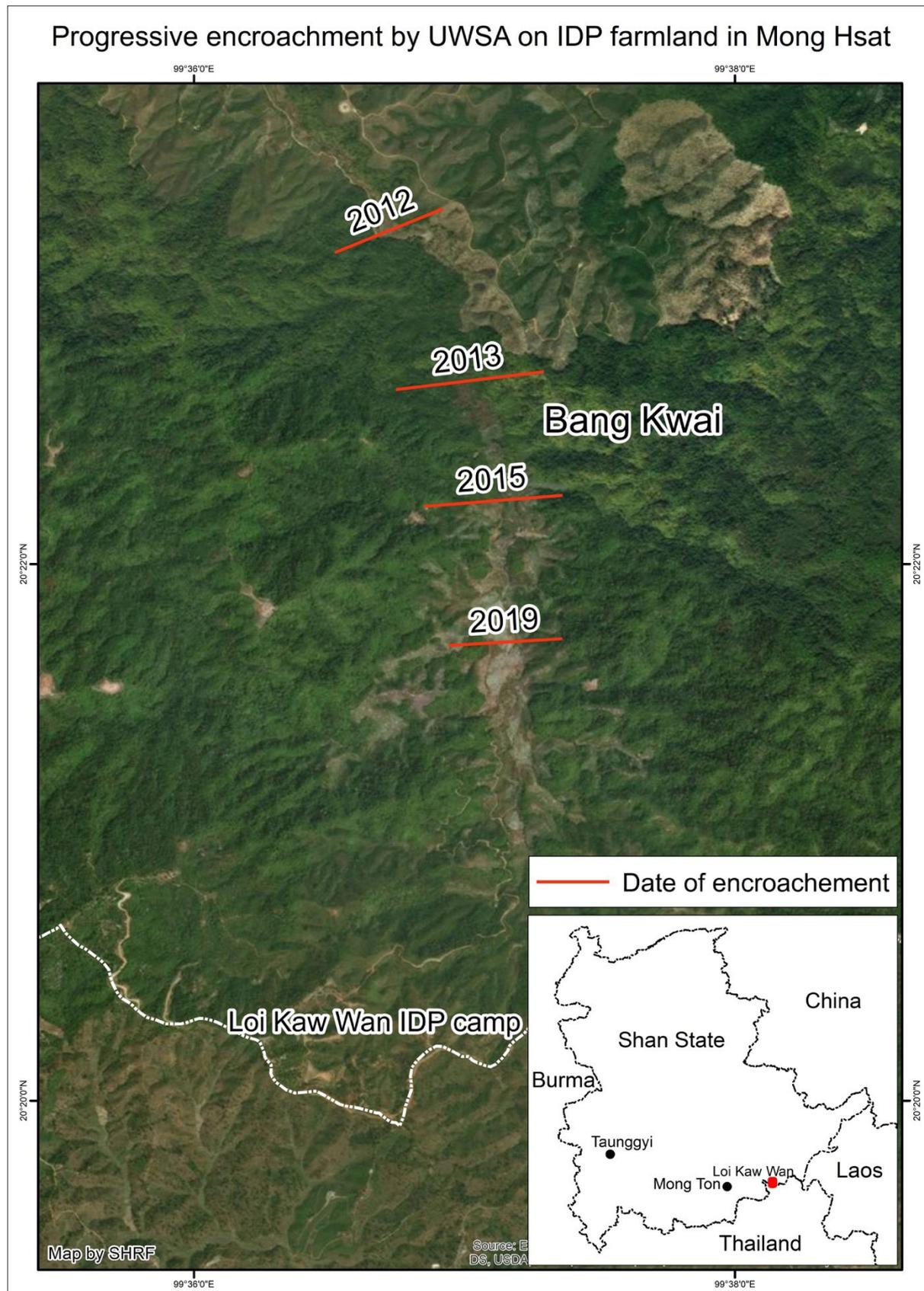
Most of the Wa villagers forcibly resettled since 1999 ended up in southern Mong Hsat township, including over 16,000 in the Mong Karn-Talang valley opposite Thailand's Mae Fah Luang district in Chiang Rai province. Land seizure and harassment by the UWSA, and Burma Army persecution of those suspected of supporting the Shan resistance, led to the entire original population of the Mong Karn-Talang valley -- nearly 2,500 villagers -- fleeing to the Thai border, where many took refuge in Loi Kaw Wan IDP camp (see Appendix 1 for list of original Shan populations in villages in Mong Karn-Talang).

During the past 20 years, the UWSA has completely transformed the Mong Karn-Talang landscape. The original ten Shan paddy-farming villages have been turned into UWSA garrison settlements. The surrounding hills have been cleared and turned into mono-crop plantations, mainly growing rubber.



The IDPs in Loi Kaw Wan have been facing great difficulty surviving on the hill tops along the border, where agricultural land is scarce, and where the UWSA has been encroaching into available farmlands around the IDP camp. After the RCSS/SSA signed a ceasefire with the Burma Army in December 2011, the IDPs started farming further afield from the camp, believing that the ceasefire would offer them protection. However, this was not tolerated by the UWSA. In June 2012, about 50 UWSA trucks arrived from Huay Aw and Mong Yawn, and about 700 troops took up position around Loi Kaw Wan. Only after negotiation with RCSS/SSA was tension defused, and an agreement reached on local boundary demarcation between the two groups. The IDPs were then allowed to farm in the area of Pang Kwai, several kilometers north of Loi Kaw Wan camp.

However, in 2013 and in 2015, the UWSA broke this agreement, progressively restricting IDPs from farming in the Pang Kwai area. Finally, on February 26, 2019, UWSA troops completely banned IDPs from farming there. This has deprived about 40 IDP families of access to farmland, on which they were formerly able to harvest over 1,000 kgs of rice. These families had braved the risk of farming close to the UWSA due to the cuts in donor support for food aid in Loi Kaw Wan camp.



Large-scale military parade at 30-year ceasefire celebration in southern UWSA headquarters

Media coverage of the UWSA's 30-year ceasefire celebrations on April 17, 2019, was entirely focused on their Pang Sang headquarters in northeast Shan State. But a similarly spectacular ceremony, involving parades and drills by several thousand troops, took place at the UWSA's southern headquarters at Huay Aw.



Military parade at UWSA's 30-year ceasefire anniversary in Pangsang, N. Shan State

The UWSA TV channel WSTV showed senior southern UWSA leaders presiding over the ceremony, with the keynote speech delivered (in Chinese) by the 171 Deputy Commander Wei Xueying. It was announced at the ceremony that the UWSA had 10,000 troops in their southern region.



Stills from WSTV broadcast of southern UWSA 30-year ceasefire celebration at Huay Aw

There were no Burmese dignitaries present. Local Shan villagers did not attend the celebrations.

The large-scale show of force sent a clear message that the UWSA were not going to relinquish their southern territories, and would fight to defend them.

5.

Concerns with mapping by international agencies

Shan-Thai border camps removed from humanitarian maps

Three months after international donors cut food aid to the refugee/IDP camps on the Shan-Thai border, the camps were removed from the monthly maps of The Border Consortium (TBC) showing refugee and IDP camp populations along the Thai-Burma border.



December 2017 TBC map

January 2018 TBC map

The Shan IDP camps along the Thai border also do not appear on UNOCHA maps of IDP camps in Shan State. For example, their most recent map “Myanmar: IDP sites in Shan State (as of 28 February 2019)” shows only IDP camps in northern Shan State.

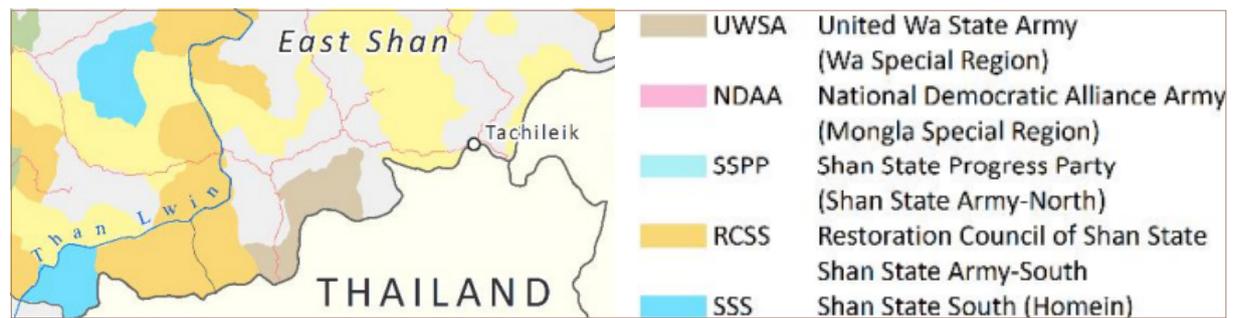


UNOCHA: IDP sites (blue colour) in Shan State

This is a source of serious concern, as it presents an inaccurate picture of displacement in Shan State. Simply because donors have decided not to support displaced populations in southern Shan State, should not mean that their existence is denied.

Misleading mapping of conflict landscape

Our maps of militarization along the southern Shan State border present a very different picture of the conflict landscape from that shown in the 2018 UNODC Myanmar Opium Survey, released in January 2019.



Sections of UNODC map: Armed groups in Myanmar 2017-2018 opium poppy growing season (from p. 7 Myanmar Opium Survey 2018)

The UNODC map of “Armed groups in Myanmar 2017-2018 opium poppy growing season” presents a contiguous area of control by the RCSS/SSA from its Loi Tai Leng and Loi Lam positions on the border to the Salween River and northwards into Mong Pan township. In fact, our maps show that the Burma Army and UWSA also control large sections of this area.

This seriously misrepresents the security situation for IDPs in these border areas, which are surrounded by hostile armed forces, and cannot move freely from the border back into Shan State.

The UNODC map also shows a significantly smaller area of UWSA control in southern Shan State than our maps. This downplays the challenge which the UWSA’s expansion of its southern territories poses to prospects of peace in Shan State. This challenge needs to be faced, and dealt with urgently at the negotiating table, rather than ignored.

6.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our data shows that the situation for displaced populations in camps on the Shan-Thai border is growing increasingly insecure. There has been military build-up by both the Burma Army and the UWSA around the camps. The Burma Army has launched unprovoked attacks, and the UWSA has further encroached on IDP land.

The ongoing occupation and expansion by the Burma Army and UWSA in their original lands make it impossible for the refugees and IDPs in camps along the border to return home under the current conditions.

It is urgently needed for the Burma Army to end its decades-long divide and rule strategy, which has resulted in the current inter-ethnic territorial conflict in southern Shan State. Instead of pushing ahead with the failed Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) process, which is further fuelling divisions among the ethnic groups, the Burma Army should implement a genuine nationwide ceasefire, and allow inclusive political dialogue to start addressing the root causes of conflict.

We therefore make the following recommendations to foreign donor governments:

- 1. To pressure the Burma Army to stop militarization and attacks in all ethnic areas of Burma, so that a new inclusive peace process can begin.**
- 2. To urgently resume food aid to IDPs and refugees in camps along the Shan-Thai border until they can return voluntarily, in safety and dignity to their homes in Shan State**

Shan State Refugee Committee (Thai Border)



www.shanrefugees.org

Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF)



www.shanhumanrights.org

Appendix:

List of original villages in Mong Karn-Talang valley, southeast Mong Hsat before UWSA forced resettlement into their area in 1999

| No. | Name of village tracts | Households | Population |
|-----|------------------------|------------|--------------|
| A | Mong Karn | 252 | 1,512 |
| B | Thalang | 78 | 471 |
| C | Satung/Na Yao | 83 | 498 |
| | Total | 413 | 2,481 |

A. Mong Karn village tract

| No. | Name of village tracts | Households | Population |
|-----|------------------------|------------|--------------|
| 1 | Wan Karn Noi | 55 | 390 |
| 2 | Wan Karn Karng | 67 | 402 |
| 3 | Wan Long | 72 | 432 |
| 4 | Wan Pong | 25 | 150 |
| 5 | Wan Pong Kaeng | 23 | 138 |
| | Total | 242 | 1,512 |

B. Talang village tract

| No. | Name of village tracts | Households | Population |
|-----|------------------------|------------|------------|
| 1 | Wan Thalang | 40 | 243 |
| 2 | Wan Koong Moang | 38 | 228 |
| | Total | 78 | 471 |

C. Satung/Na Yao village tract

| No. | Name of village tracts | Households | Population |
|-----|------------------------|------------|------------|
| 1 | Wan Satung | 20 | 120 |
| 2 | Wan Mong Hom | 28 | 168 |
| 3 | Wan Na Yao | 35 | 210 |
| | Total | 83 | 498 |