

# A shifting power balance

## Junta control shrinks in southeast Burma

Data and maps compiled by Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN) in this briefier provide clear evidence that since the February 2021 coup, the State Administration Council (SAC) junta's ability to control southeast Burma has significantly diminished, both militarily and in terms of governance. By July 2023, the SAC had lost 62 military camps as a result of offensives by the Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army (KNU/KNLA) and its allies, whose expanded control of territory now directly threatens the regime's central transport artery between Yangon and Naypyidaw. The SAC has also lost control over 370 schools which are now governed by the KNU's education department. Escalated SAC artillery and air attacks have failed to reverse their loss of territory, but have driven up internally displaced person (IDP) numbers in Kawthoolei to at least 637,414, an increase of 20% since February this year. KPSN is urgently appealing for \$43 million to be provided cross-border for emergency rice needs of these IDPs.

SAC military camps captured or forcibly abandoned: Feb - Dec 2021

SAC military camps captured or forcibly abandoned: Feb 2021-July 2023



### About KPSN

Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN) is the largest network of Karen civil society organizations in Burma/Myanmar. KPSN member organizations have facilitated humanitarian support for vulnerable conflict-affected Karen communities, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugees for decades. KPSN works to empower local Karen communities, document human rights issues, and facilitate advocacy for a sustainable and equitable peace in Karen areas of Burma.

## Accelerating loss of SAC military camps in Kawthoolei

Comparison of the preceding maps showing locations of SAC military camps captured or forcibly abandoned by December 2021 and by July 2023, reveals an accelerating rate of loss: by the end of 2021, eleven months after the coup, 21 SAC camps had been lost, while by mid-2023, eighteen months later, a further 41 camps had been lost. The maps also highlight the widening territory in which losses have taken place. In 2021, losses were limited to Mutraw and Doo Tha Htoo districts, while

SAC military camps captured or forcibly abandoned Feb 2021 – July 2023				
District	Captured SAC Camps	Forcibly abandoned SAC Camps	Captured/Now Repossessed	Abandoned/Now Repossessed
Doo Tha Htoo ( Thaton)	1	16	0	1
Taw Oo (Taungoo)	0	6	0	0
Kler Lwe Htoo ( Nyaunglebin)	10	3	0	0
Mergui/Tavoy ( Tanintharyi)	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mutraw (Papun)	8	13	0	0
Dooplaya	5	0	7	0
Hpa-an	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>

Number of SAC camps captured or forcibly abandoned in Kawthoolei (Feb 2021-July 2023)

### SAC military camps captured or forcibly abandoned - topographic and infrastructure map



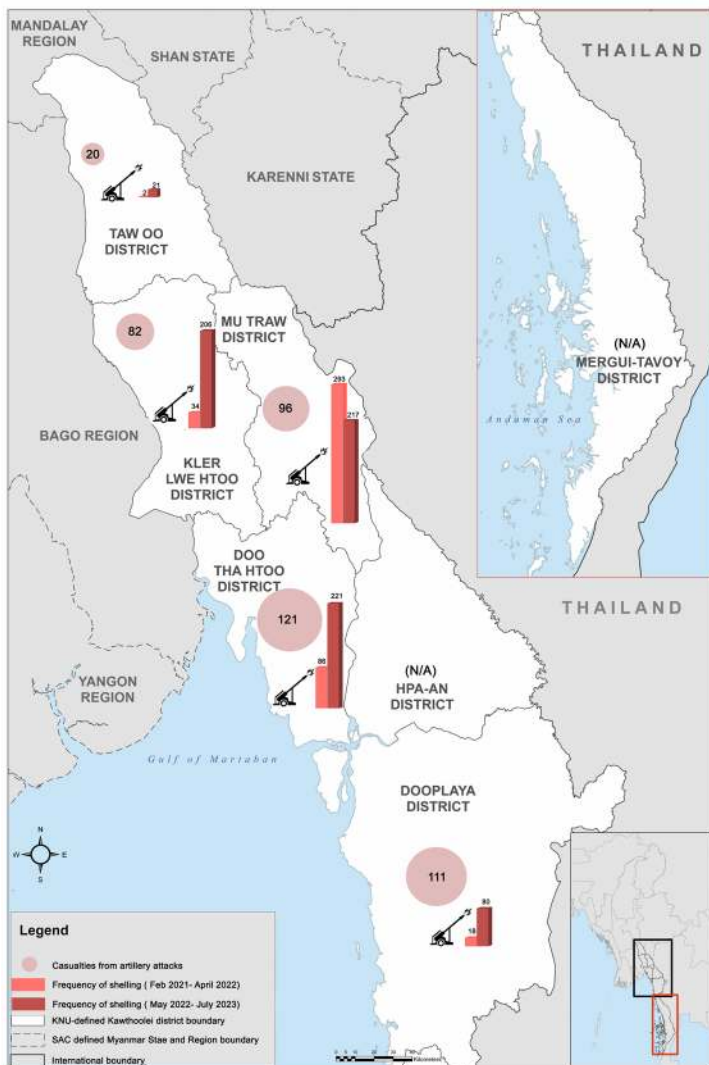
by mid-2023, losses had spread northwards across Taw Oo and Kler Lwe Htoo districts, and southwards to Dooplaya district.

The topographic map shows how the SAC bases lost to KNU military action relate to major transport infrastructure and terrain. The most striking strategic gain by the KNU is its increased control over the western and eastern boundaries of its northern territories – including the Salween River borderline with Thailand – as well as over the main transport routes from central Burma into these territories. This severely hampers the regime’s ability to supply its military camps in this region, and to launch offensives against the resistance forces operating in this mountainous terrain. The KNU’s expansion westwards and southwards also poses a significant threat to the regime’s main road and rail transport artery from Yangon to Naypyidaw, as well as to the Asia Highway trade corridor from Yangon to Myawaddy on the Thai border.

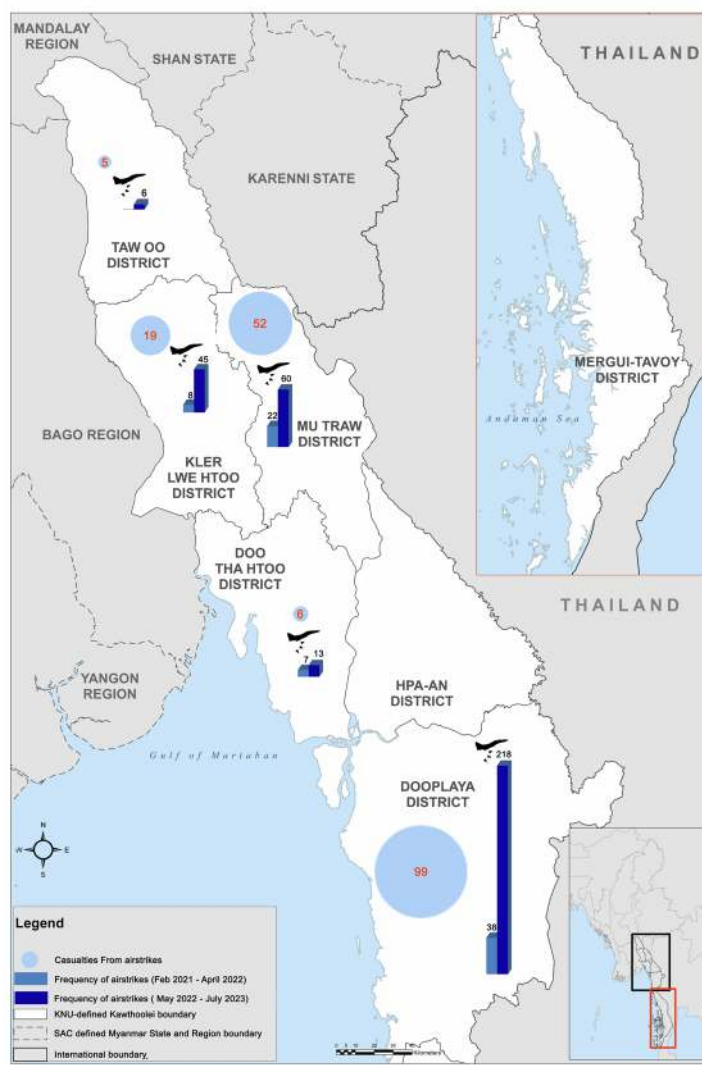
These SAC territorial losses have significantly affected the regime’s ability to project governance authority in southeast Burma. The numbers of civil servants still loyal to the junta have become fewer and increasingly isolated in the pockets of SAC control within the expanded Kawthoolei territories, where the KNU is increasingly able to consolidate its own governance structures, including in the social service sectors. This is further detailed in the education governance section below.

# Escalated SAC artillery attacks and airstrikes

Frequency of artillery attacks February 2021 - July 2023



Frequency of airstrikes February 2021 - July 2023



SAC artillery attacks and resulting casualties Feb 2021-July 2023			
District	Frequency of artillery attacks	Injured	Killed
Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton)	307	96	25
Taw Oo ( Taungoo)	23	19	1
Kler Lwe Htoo (Nyaunglebin)	240	68	14
Mergui-Tavoy (Tanintharyi)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mutraw (Papun)	510	64	32
Dooplaya	98	95	16
Hpa An	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>1178</b>	<b>342</b>	<b>88</b>

SAC airstrikes and resulting casualties Feb 2021-July 2023			
District	Frequency of airstrikes	Injured	Killed
Doo Tha Htoo ( Thaton)	20	5	1
Taw Oo ( Taungoo )	6	5	0
Kler Lwe Htoo ( Nyaunglegin)	53	9	10
Mergui-Tavoy (Tanintharyi)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Mutraw (papun)	82	33	19
Dooplaya	256	93	6
Hpa An	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>417</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>41</b>

Our data shows a significant increase in the overall number of SAC artillery attacks and airstrikes during the last 15 months compared to the first 15 months after the coup – inflicting over 600 casualties in total. Our mapping highlights that SAC has relied more heavily on artillery attacks in Mutraw, Kler Lwe Htoo and Doo Tha Htoo districts than in Taw Oo and Dooplaya. Although artillery usage is still frequent in Mutraw, the number has dropped by about 25% during the last 15 months, as compared to the previous period, reflecting the SAC’s shrinking control there.

Mapping also shows that airstrikes have been used most intensively in Dooplaya, where the flatter terrain west of the Dawna Range accommodates fewer hilltop SAC artillery posts, necessitating airpower over ground shelling to defend against resistance attacks.

The indiscriminate use of both airstrikes and shelling in civilian-populated areas, as well as direct targeting of community infrastructure, such as religious buildings, schools and clinics, has been a key driver of displacement.

## Civilian infrastructure targeted and destroyed/damaged by SAC airstrikes and artillery Feb 2021 -July 2023

District	School	Church	Monastery	Clinic
Doo Tha Htoo ( Thaton)	1	0	4	0
Taw Oo ( Taungoo)	2	2	1	1
Kler Lwe Htoo ( Nyaunglebin)	6	2	0	2
Mergui-Tavoy (Tanintharyi)	0	1	0	0
Mutraw (Papun)	8	4	1	2
Dooplaya	2	6	4	1
Hpa An	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>



Woman injured by SAC shelling, Kler Lwe Htoo district



Community school destroyed by SAC air strikes, Mutraw district



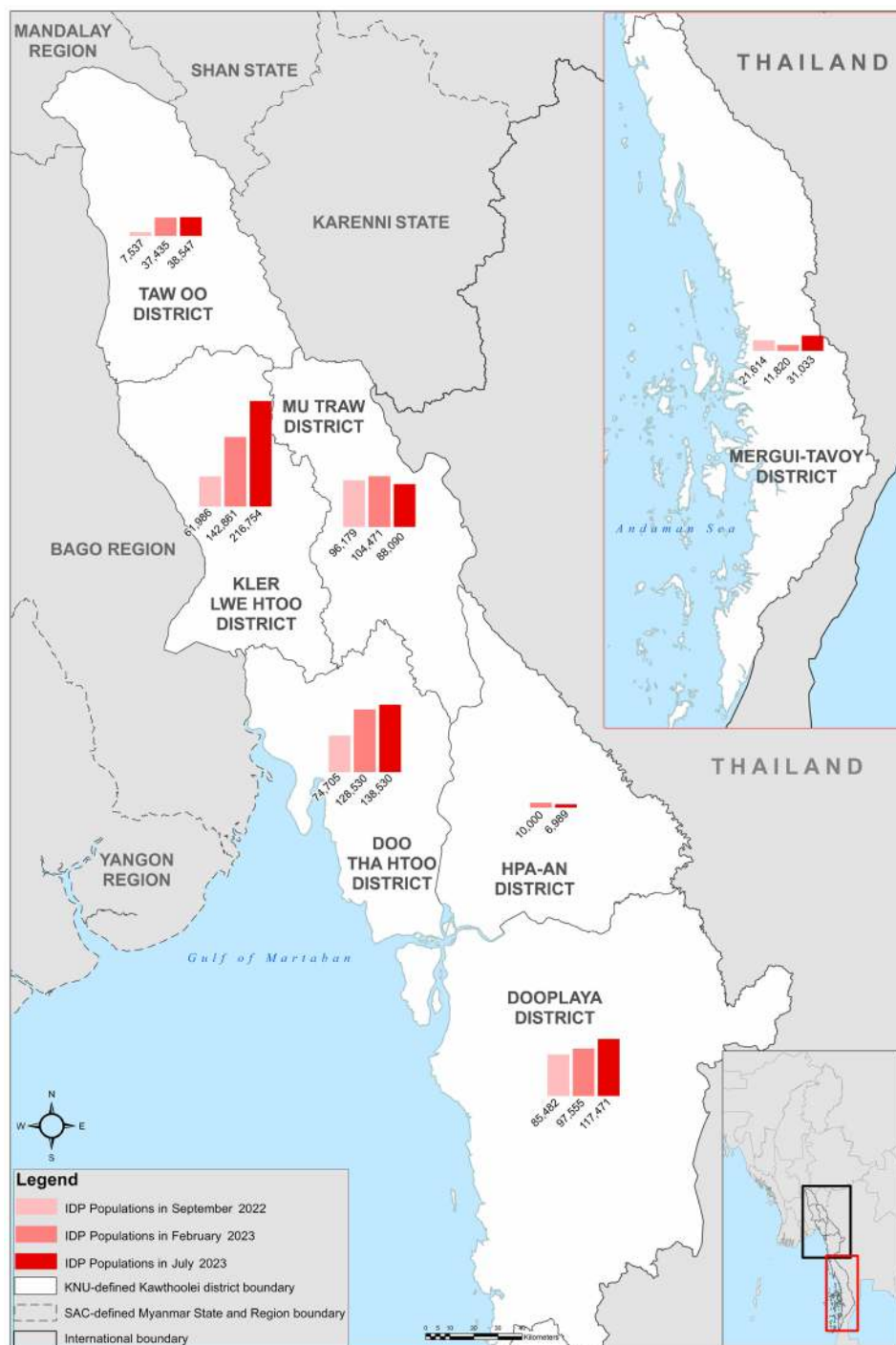
Civilians killed by SAC airstrike, Tee Gaw Hya village, Mutraw District



Toe Doh Pnweh Poe Klo Church destroyed by SAC airstrikes, Dooplaya district

## Rising IDP numbers in Kawthoolei

Increases in Kawthoolei IDP populations since Feb 2021



The map and table (left) show that as of July 2023, there are now a total of at least 637,414 IDPs in Kawthoolei, an increase of 20% from the previous total of 532,672 IDPs in February. This does not include some IDP communities which Karen organizations are unable to access, especially in Dooplaya and Mergui-Tavoy districts.

The increase in IDP numbers directly reflects the spreading contestation of SAC control. As KNU and its allies continue territorial expansion, the SAC has escalated its artillery and air attacks on local communities, causing residents to flee in terror. The only district where the total number of IDPs has slightly decreased is in Mutraw, due to the KNU's tightened control of this territory and increased ability to protect communities from artillery attacks.

Unfortunately, UNOCHA continues to vastly underestimate the total number of IDPs in Southeast Burma, reporting only 322,600 IDPs for all Kawthoolei areas in their 15 July 2023 humanitarian update. As the Yangon-based UN agencies are operating under the restrictions of the SAC regime, and have no physical access to most parts of Kawthoolei, the accuracy of their figures needs to be questioned – particularly by donor countries who continue to channel most of their humanitarian funds via Yangon.

Based on the increased numbers of IDPs and the need for 6 months' rice per person, it is now estimated that at least US\$43 million is needed over the next 12 months to address the current food crisis. In addition to this basic food item, there remains an urgent need for non-food items such as shelter, medicines, school support, as well as specific assistance for women and children. The only way to comprehensively assist these IDPs is through local border-based, coordinated aid networks such as the Karen Emergency Relief Team (KERT).

Kawthoolei IDP populations since Feb 2021 coup			
District	August 2022	February 2023	July 2023
Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton)	74,705	128,530	138,530
Taw Oo (Taungoo)	7,537	37,435	38,547
Kler Lwe Htoo (Nyaunglebin)	61,986	142,861	216,754
Mergui-Tavoy (Tanintharyi)	21,614	11,820	31,033
Mutraw (Papun)	96,179	104,471	88,090
Dooplaya	85,482	97,555	117,471
Hpa An	-	10,000	6,989
<b>Total</b>	<b>347,503</b>	<b>532,672</b>	<b>637,414</b>



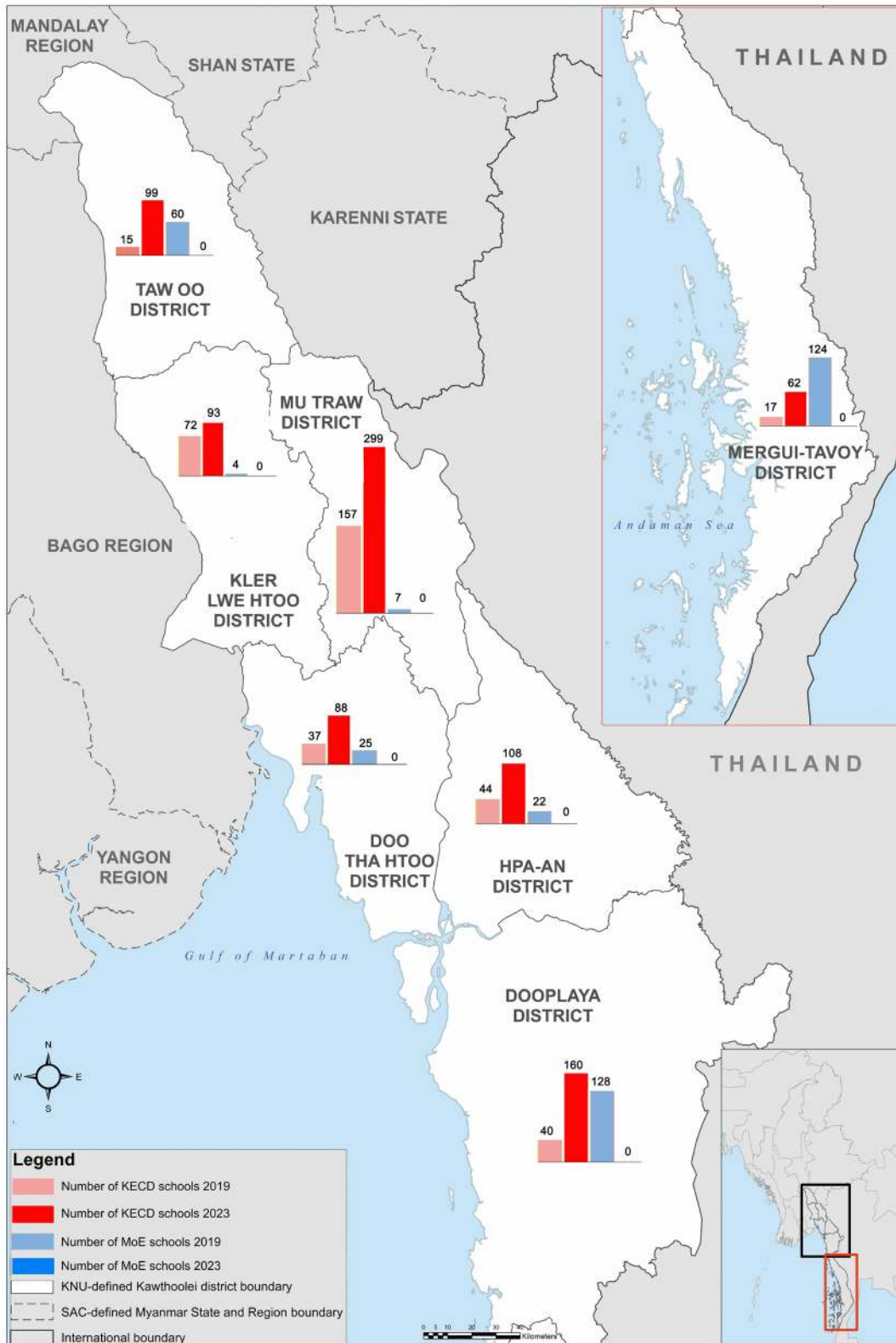
Chon Inn villager injured by SAC airstrike. Hsaw Hti Township, Kler Lwe Htoo District

## Education governance in KNU and mixed administration areas of Kawthoolei

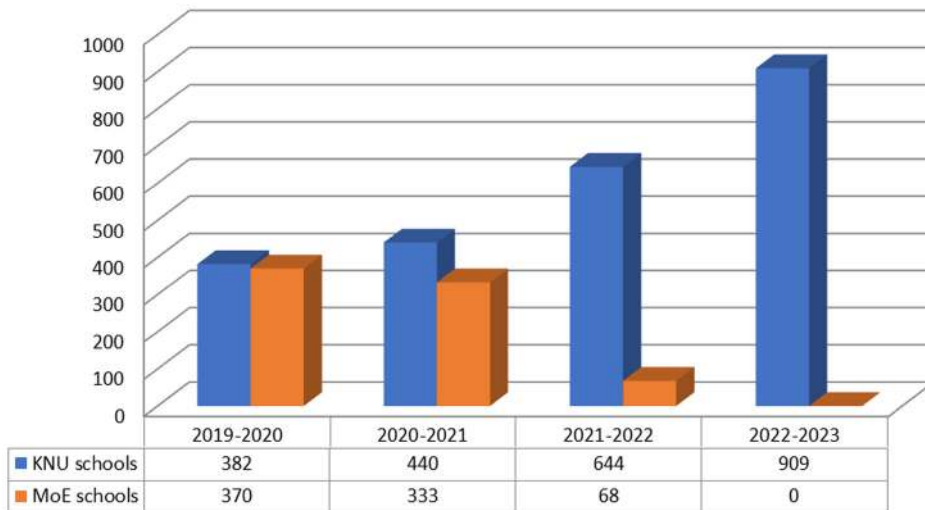
Before the 2021 coup, there were three main types of schools in areas solely administered by KNU or in “mixed administration” areas (partly administered by the Naypyidaw government):

1. KNU government schools run under the “Karen Education and Culture Department” (KECD), using their own curriculum, teaching local history and culture, with mother tongue language instruction.
2. Private or community schools, also using the KECD curriculum and reporting to the KNU.
3. Schools run by the Naypyidaw government’s Ministry of Education (MoE), using the Burmese language national curriculum.

Changes in KNU vs SAC school governance before and after coup by district



Note: The education data is based on the 2019/20 - 2022/23 school years until May 2023. This data does not include schools run by other ethnic administrations such as in Doo Playa or Mergui districts.



**Note:** As the community/private schools are not directly governed by either the KNU or the MoE, they have not been included in the table or map. In 2023, there were 324 community schools in KNU governed districts, which also use the KECD curriculum and are also subsidized by the KECD. Thus there was a total of 1,233 KNU and KNU affiliated schools in 2023.



Official KNU signboard on Salween River at Thailand/Burma border



KECD - Taw Naw High School, Kawkareik Township, Dooplaya District

After the coup, there have been dramatic shifts in the types of schools operating in the KNU and mixed administration areas. The KECD schools, numbering only 382 in the 2019-2020 school year, have almost tripled to over 900.

During the same period, the MoE schools – which numbered 370 in 2019-20 – have dropped to zero in 2023 in the KNU and mixed administration areas.

The huge increase in the number of KECD schools and collapse of MoE schools directly reflect the expansion of KNU territorial control since the coup. With the progressive loss of SAC military camps and shrinking Naypyidaw control, many former MoE schools have come under KNU administration and now function as KECD schools. A large number of MoE teachers had already joined the CDM movement, and switched to work in KECD schools. Many private, community schools have also now come fully under the KNU.

At the same time, the KECD has had to set up new schools in some areas to accommodate children seeking refuge from the SAC's intensified air and artillery attacks on their villages.

The education governance map shows the changes in school governance in KNU-controlled and mixed administration areas of each Kawthoolei district since the coup. While all KNU districts have seen a major increase in KECD run schools, the most dramatic changes have taken place in Dooplaya district, where in 2019, MoE administered most of the schools – 128 schools vs. 40 KECD schools – while in 2023 there are now 160 KECD schools with no MoE schools still running.

The shift from MoE to KECD-governed schools represents significant progress towards establishment of a devolved federal education system in Kawthoolei, whereby all schools come under State/provincial authority with curriculums based on the local majority languages and culture/history.

International aid is being sought by the KECD and the Karen Teacher Working Group not only for the running costs of the growing number of schools in Kawthoolei, but also to repair and rebuild schools damaged by ongoing SAC airstrikes.

# IDPs and cross border food assistance - 2023

