

# Local defence forces' joint operation met with Myanmar air force airstrikes in Thantlang

Thantlang: a battle-ground once again

REPORT BY MYANMAR WITNESS, 16 March 2023

## Key Event Details

- **Location of Incident:** Thantlang (ထန်တလန်), Chin State (ချင်းပြည်နယ်), [22.689766,93.428483].
- **Date/Time of Incident:**
  - Multiple events between 29 Dec 2022 and 26 Feb 2023
- **Alleged Perpetrator(s) and/or Involvement:**
  - Myanmar Air Force (MAF)
  - State Administration Council (SAC)
  - Chin National Army (CNA)<sup>1</sup>
  - Chin Defense Force (CDF)
- **Summary of Investigation**
  - Thantlang is an area of known resistance between local defence forces (CDF and CNA) and the SAC.
  - Multiple incidents were reported in Thantlang over a two month period, including airstrikes, drone attacks and ground battles.
  - Across a two-month period, Myanmar Witness has verified footage showing smoke in the area, the destruction of a CDF base, the destruction of a police station and aircraft in the area.
  - Myanmar Witness has also identified claims of additional airstrikes and attacks, which could be not verified at present.

## Summary

On 29 December 2022, according to the [Chin Defense Force \(CDF\)](#), the 'Tilim Operation' commenced. The operation targeted an SAC base in Thantlang and involved CDF-Thantlang and Chin National Army (CNA) joint forces. Myanmar Witness has investigated events during the two-month operation between 29 December 2022 and 27 February 2023. During the

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<sup>1</sup> There are multiple armed groups in Chin State. The CNA and CNF were formed in 1987 and 1988 respectively, while the CDF, which is an organisation comprised of 17 different defence forces, was created following the most recent Coup, in April 2021. The groups have been known to coordinate attacks.

operation, the Chin Journal [reported](#) that, in Thantlang alone, 20 SAC troops were killed, six people were arrested and approximately 50 guns were seized.

Multiple reports in early January 2023 indicate that fighting took place in the Thantlang area. Ground battles between the State Administration Council (SAC) forces and the CNA/CDF-Thantlang joint forces were [reported](#), and on the morning of 1 January 2023, the CNA and CDF-Thantlang joint forces allegedly attacked a location where SAC troops were camped.

There have been multiple sightings of Myanmar Air Force (MAF) fighter jets in the area. On 10 and 11 January 2023, the CDF's headquarters (Camp Victoria), near the Indian border, was hit by a MAF airstrike. This was [investigated and verified](#) by Myanmar Witness. Although the Chin National Front (CNF) announced that the SAC conducted 115 airstrikes in four townships within Chin State between January 2023 and February 2023, this cannot be fully verified by Myanmar Witness.

## Location



Figure 1: [Left] Location of Thantlang in Myanmar. [Right] Map of Chin state with pins identifying the location of Thantlang and the CNA headquarters which was hit by an airstrike.

# THANTLANG TIMELINE

- 30 DEC 2022 - 1 JAN 2023**

The Chin Journal claimed that there was a battle between the SAC forces and the CNA/CDF-Thantlang joint forces in Thantlang
- 5 JAN 2023**

It is reported that three houses in Thantlang were burned due to a SAC airstrike
- 10-11 JAN 2023**

CDF base at Camp Victoria was struck by SAC airstrikes
- 31 JAN 2023**

Two SAC helicopters were attacked by CDF/CNA drones while landing in Thantlang
- 3-5 FEB 2023**

Reports of CDF/CNA attacks on a SAC base and a police station in Thantlang
- 9 FEB 2023**

State-owned media reports that CDF/CNA forces have taken over the Thantlang police station
- 25 FEB 2023**

Reports of 15 aerial attacks by SAC forces on CDF/CNA locations in Thantlang
- 26 FEB 2023**

Claims that CDF/CNA damaged a SAC helicopter via drone attack while it was landing in Thantlang, including via a CDF statement

## A chronological breakdown of the investigation

On 29 December 2022, according to the [Chin Defense Force \(CDF\)](#), the 'Telim Operation' commenced. The operation targeted an SAC base in Thantlang and involved CDF-Thantlang and CNA joint forces. This led to clashes between SAC forces and the joint defence forces over the following two months.

### 30 December 2022 - 1 January 2023

The Chin Journal [claimed](#) that there was a battle between SAC forces and the CNA/CDF-Thantlang joint forces in Thantlang after the CNA/CDF-Thantlang joint forces attacked the location where SAC troops were camped. According to a [Chin Journal](#) source, four SAC personnel were killed and many wounded. During the three-day battle, there were no claims of casualties among CNA/CDF-Thantlang forces and no confirmation of SAC casualties.



Figure 2: Geolocated [footage](#) from the events in Thantlang, verified by using the mountain range and the orientation of the buildings [22.703113, 93.427096].

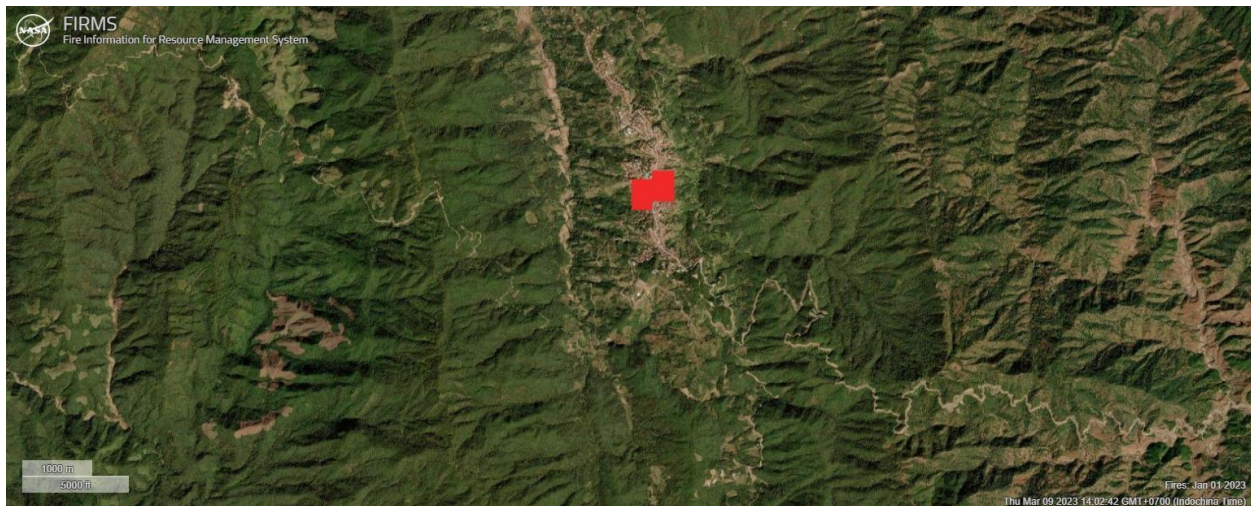


Figure 3: [FIRMS](#) imagery showing the fires in Thantlang on 1 January 2023 [22.703113, 93.427096].

5 January 2023

There are [reports](#) that three civilian houses in Thantlang burnt down following an SAC airstrike. This was verified by Myanmar Witness (Figure 5). There are also unverified [claims](#) of another airstrike on the same day in Thantlang.



Figure 4: Geolocation of the [claimed](#) SAC airstrike on 5 January, when three residential houses in Thantlang burnt down [22.709912, 93.426436].

10-11 January 2023

The CDF base at Camp Victoria was hit by SAC airstrikes. Myanmar Witness verified, investigated, and extensively reported on this event, including in a published report: '[Myanmar Military air strikes at Camp Victoria](#)'.

6, 7, 8, 21 and 23 January 2023

It is [claimed](#) that the SAC attacked Mindat Township on 6 January with both ground forces and airstrikes, displacing and shooting civilians, with children allegedly among the deceased. Religious buildings and houses were burnt and destroyed. A total of eight further airstrikes are [claimed](#) to have hit Mindat Township on 7, 8, 21 and 23 January 2023.

31 January 2023

Two SAC helicopters were [reportedly](#) hit by drone-launched bombs while they landed in Thantlang, and CNA/CDF-Thantlang joint forces arrested six SAC personnel in Thantlang. Images allegedly associated with the drone attacks, released by Khit Thit Media, were geolocated by Myanmar Witness to Thantlang (Figure 5).



Figure 5: [Khit Thit Media reported](#) that two SAC helicopters were hit by drone attacks on 31 January 2023 while landing in Thantlang [22.689705, 93.427958].

### 3-9 February 2023

Between the 3 and 9 February 2023, multiple sources reported attacks on a police station. The [Chin Journal](#) alongside other [media outlets](#) claimed that an SAC base and a police station in Thantlang were attacked by a drone (see Figure 6). Myanmar Witness could not verify the date of the events; however, footage of damaged buildings was geolocated to a local police station.

On 8 February 2023, state-owned media MRTV [reported](#) that at around 2200 local time, the CNA/CDF joint forces launched an attack on the police station (additional sources redacted due to privacy concerns). At around 0200 on 9 February 2023, the joint forces had [allegedly](#) taken over the building, forcing the police to abandon the station and retreat to the SAC camp in the south of Thantlang.

The CDF made a [statement](#) that seems to line up with this, saying the police station was seized on 8 and 9 February 2023. Similarly, a [video](#) released by a Chin news outlet, claims that the police station was seized by CNA/CDF joint forces on 9 February 2023 at 0100 local time. After the raid on the police station, CNA Information Officer Salai Htet Ni [said](#) that more than 40 small arms, including a G3 grenade launcher, were seized (Figure 8). Myanmar Witness was able to identify many of the weapons seized as models that are consistent with police equipment inventories.

Figure 6: Geolocated [footage](#) of a drone attack on a SAC base and police station in Thantlang [22.702645,



93.426122].

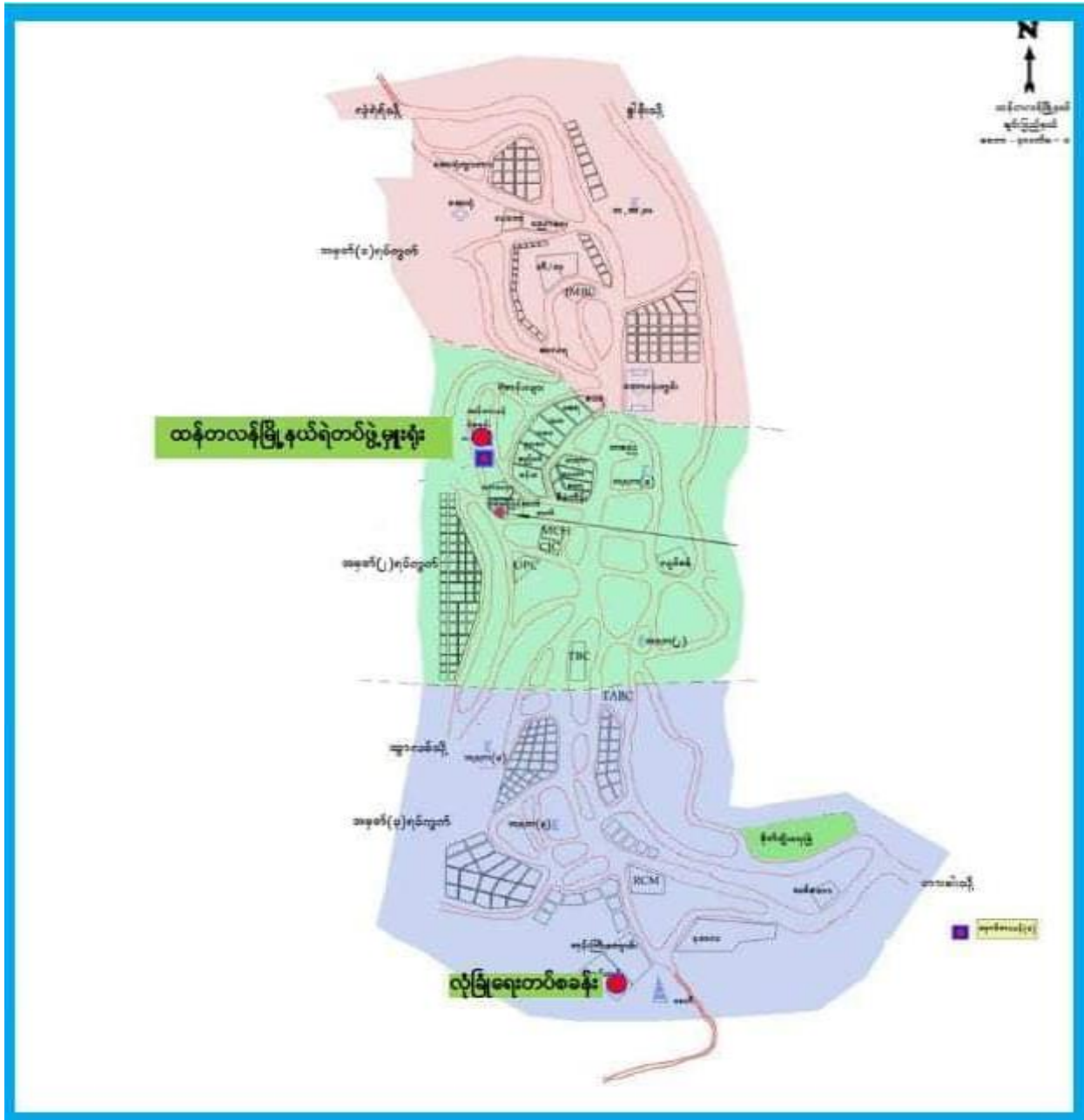


Figure 7: A map of the police station in Thantlang released by state-owned [media](#).





Figure 8: An image of the weapons which were [allegedly](#) seized by CDF during the attack on the police station in Thantlang.

## 25 February 2023

It is [claimed](#) that between 0400 and 0900 local time, the SAC carried out airstrikes on possible CNA/CDF locations in Thantlang 15 times (Figure 9). While the footage released by Chin Journal, allegedly of the aircraft used in these attacks, shows either a single Yak-130 making multiple passes or multiple Yak-130s, the video doesn't show the airstrike itself. Stills from the video reveal that one underwing pylon mounts some sort of ordnance while the other one is empty, which suggests ordnance may have been employed before the video was taken. Despite this, Myanmar Witness cannot verify the footage.

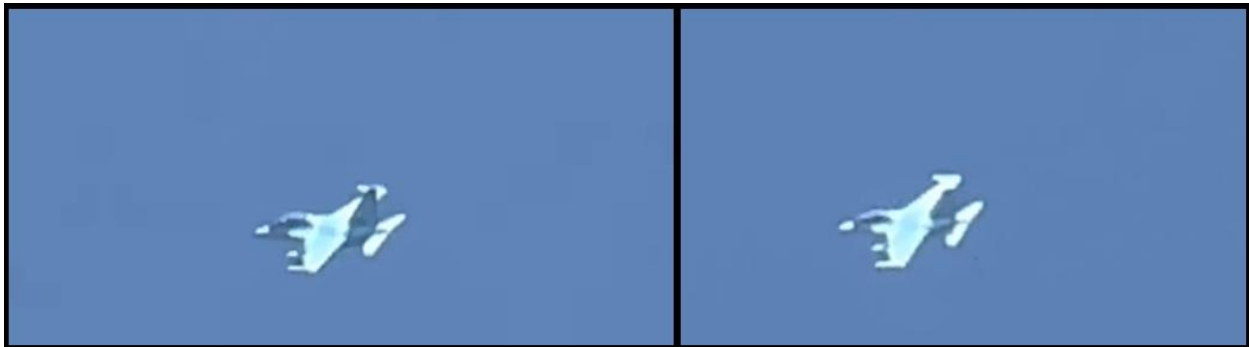


Figure 9: [Alleged](#) footage of the aircraft involved in the 25 February bombings.

26 February 2023

At around 1500 local time the SAC are [claimed](#) to have launched an air attack in Thantlang with two fighter jets and two Mi-17 helicopters. While one of the helicopters was landing, CNA/CDF joint forces reportedly attacked it with a drone. The helicopter emitted smoke and flew towards the side of Hakha. Myanmar Witness was able to geolocate footage of the event (see Figure 10 for details).



Figure 10: It is [claimed](#) that a helicopter carrying food to Thantlang was attacked by a local defence force drone on 26 February 2023 [22.689766,93.428483].

## The ‘Tilim Operation’

On 26 February 2023, after [two months of incidents](#) between the SAC and CDF/CNA joint forces, the CDF released a statement stating that on 29 December 2022, at 2200 local time, the ‘Tilim Operation’ had started. The operation targeted an SAC base in Thantlang and involved CDF-Thantlang and CNA joint forces. This led to clashes between SAC forces and the joint defence forces over the following two months. The statement noted the following events:

- On 1 January 2023, five houses were burnt down near the Thantlang police station where the SAC and police were camped.
- On 2 January 2023 two more houses were burnt down near the police station.
- On 8 February 2023, CDF/CNA joint forces attacked the police station and by the morning of 9 February 2023 had seized the building and more than 40 weapons using a force of approximately 50 personnel.
- In the 60 days since the start of the operation, four CDF members and two CNA members have been killed.
- The SAC stated that since 9 February 2023, when the police station was taken over, Thantlang has been bombarded with several airstrikes and heavy artillery fire.
- From 9-26 February 2023, SAC aircraft had attacked Thantlang more than 95 times.

The full statement can be seen in Figure 11. Although the statement doesn’t provide a verification of events, the information presented largely supports the timeline of events identified by Myanmar Witness.

