

# **The Situation of Corona Virus, COVID-19 in Pgakenyaw (Karen) Communities in Thailand**

Presented by Pgakenyaw Association for Sustainable Development (PASD)

## **On COVID-19**

Since the outbreak of Corona virus has taken place in China, criticism was made with different opinions. Pgakenyaw people believe that uncommon practices can cause certain kinds of mishap. The widespread of COVID-19 throughout the world implies the closer connectivity among nations near and far.

According to the statistic updated on the 4 April 2020, there were 1,118,202 Corona virus infected people with 59,220 reported deaths worldwide, recovered 229,157. However, so far, there has been no report of Pgakenyaw infected person. Nevertheless, the dissemination of information has already threatened the people at the community level. It reminds Pgakenyaw people of the long past around 150 years ago when smallpox attacked a number of Pgakenyaw communities followed by other diseases, for example, leprosy and cholera, all of which brought so many deaths in their communities. From the testimony of Pgakenyaw elderly people, at times of epidemic diseases, the ritual called '*Kloh Hee Kloh Koh*' was performed at the community level to protect the whole community from malevolent spirits as well as pandemic diseases. This ritual is still practiced up to now.

In Thailand, the COVID-19 infection was amounted to 2,067 cases with 20 deaths and 612 recoveries. According to an updated statistic on the 4 April 2020, Chiang Mai reported 32 confirmed infected cases. Starting from 3 April 2020, the Thai Government has announced its curfew from 10:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. of everyday.

## **1. Situation in the Areas of Pgakenyaw Communities**

Currently, Pgakenyaw people gain more knowledge about the pandemic situation from different channels of media and are aware of the stringent preventive policy of the Government to fight against Corona virus. Many Pgakenyaw communities are reviving their traditional ritual to cast out all malevolent spirits and to prevent pandemic diseases from entering.

At the district level, check-points are set up at all inlet-outlet routes to screen the people for physical safety. Local Government authorities make announcements of the Emergency Decree as well as the National Curfew, including the Provincial Order every now and then to recommend to the people what to do and what not.

At the community level, administrative and public health authorities urge the people to take good care of themselves and to refrain from a place where several people are gathering. Community members who have just come back home from town and overseas are requested to stay in isolation at the end of the village, or in the field hut for 14 days before they can join their families to resume

their normal life. During the fourteen-day isolation, public health workers come to visit the people in their own quarantine every second day. Community activities either are cancelled, or postponed.

Corona virus also creates economic impact on the families where their members had to seek cash income in the cities in order to solve the problem of family indebtedness. Economic tension emerges in a number of families, particularly when their members have to pay regular visits to the hospital for medication for long-term and costly diseases, such as, high blood pressure and diabetes.

It is not only reviving traditional rituals for community protection, Pgakenyaw people also refer to traditional proverbs and instructions about self-reliant livelihood through organic food crops from rotational farming and kinship-based relationship in the community.

## **2. Recommendations**

- 1) Technical explanation about Corona virus is generally scientific and difficult for indigenous people to digest. Thus, the Government should support the development of simplified version of all important points of COVID 19 pandemic and as a handbook for how to cope with the disease and send it to each local community and/or upload it onto social media. If possible, the handbook should be translated into indigenous mother languages.
- 2) The Government should provide support in cash and/or in kind for virus test, safety masks, and cleansing items for poor families.
- 3) The Government should develop effective measures to ensure the fast track of referring infected cases from communities to the hospital.
- 4) To alleviate the consequence of economic shut-down in various sectors, the Government should come up with the policy in support of self-reliance economy at the community level, particularly with more community participation in protected areas. In this regard, local communities can absorb the influx of labors returning homes from economic shut-down in the cities.
- 5) It is high time for the Government to provide support for existing CSO networks to: disseminate important information about Corona virus; implement projects for the pandemic prevention at the community level; and gather related data from communities and send them to Government and other concerned agencies.