



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

September 12, 2014 / KHRG #13-120-A4-11

Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, October 2013

This Interview with Saw A--- describes human rights abuses occurring in Hpapun District during October 2013 and earlier periods, including the subjection of villagers to forced labour by members of the Border Guard Force (BGF). Saw A--- also describes improvements in local conditions since the signing of the 2012 ceasefire between the Burma/Myanmar government and the KNU.

- *Local villagers were forced to perform periodic sentry and other kinds of duty at a local BGF camp without pay.*
 - *Since the signing of the 2012 ceasefire between the Burma/Myanmar government and the KNU, local villagers have been subjected to fewer instances of forced labour, have experienced fewer restrictions on their freedom of movement and landmine explosions, and experience less anxiety related to active armed conflict than in the past.*
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Interview | Saw A---, (male, 49), B--- village, Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District (October 2013)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Hpapun District in October 2013 and is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹ This interview was received along with other information from Hpapun District, including six other interviews, three incident reports, one situation update and 31 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Farming

What is your name?

I am A---.

¹ KHRG trains community members in eastern Burma/Myanmar to document individual human rights abuses using a standardised reporting format; conduct interviews with other villagers; and write general updates on the situation in areas with which they are familiar. When conducting interviews, community members are trained to use loose question guidelines, but also to encourage interviewees to speak freely about recent events, raise issues that they consider to be important and share their opinions or perspectives on abuse and other local dynamics.

² In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in eastern Burma/Myanmar, KHRG aims to make all field information received available on the KHRG website once it has been processed and translated, subject only to security considerations. For additional reports categorised by Type, Issue, Location and Year, please see the Related Readings component following each report on KHRG's Website.

How old are you?

I am 49 years old.

Where do you live?

I live in B--- [village].

How about village tract?

Meh P'Ree village tract.

How about township?

I don't know.

What nationality are you?

I am Karen.

How about your religion?

I am a Buddhist.

What do you do for your livelihood?

I do farming.

Do you have a family [are you married]?

Yes, I do.

How many children do you have?

I have seven children.

How old is the eldest?

The eldest is sixteen years old.

How about the youngest?

Over a year old.

Two years [will they be two years old in the near future]?

Yes.

You live in B--- village; are there BGF [Border Guard Force³ soldiers] staying in your village?

³ Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions of the Tatmadaw were established in 2010, and they are composed mostly of soldiers from former non-state armed groups, such as older constellations of the DKBA, which have formalised ceasefire agreements with the Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw. BGF battalions are assigned four digit battalion numbers, whereas regular Tatmadaw infantry battalions are assigned two digit battalion numbers and light infantry battalions are identified by two or three-digit battalion

At my house?

No, in your village called B---

They stay in the lower part of the village.

In the lower part of the village?

Yes.

Do they ask [the villagers] to transport things [for them]?

Sometimes [one or two] villagers have go [to their camp] and stay with them.

Do you know the name of the [BGF] leaders who are staying [in the lower part of the village]?

I don't know the name of the commander. He has not been in the village for long.

Have you ever gone [to the camp] and stayed with them?

I went to [the camp] for a [short] while [today].

This morning?

Yes, and then after a little while I had to go and collect vegetables [for them].

Have you finished collecting vegetables for them?

Yes, I went with another person, the one that was carrying things [vegetables] before [referring to another villager who had passed by shortly before the interview began].

Did they hire [pay] you for collecting the vegetables?

No, they didn't.

Are there many [soldiers in the camp]?

I didn't go inside, I was only at the perimeter.

Do they stay in their place [camp]? Or in people's houses?

Some stay in their place [camp], and some stay in people's houses, because the [villagers'] houses are close [to the camp].

So they stay in the community?

They stay beside the village.

Have they been there for long?

numbers. For more information, see "[DKBA officially becomes Border Guard Force](#)" *Democratic Voice of Burma*, August 2010, and, "[Exploitation and recruitment under the DKBA in Pa'an District](#)," KHRG, June 2009.

They have been there for the whole rainy season.

Do they come into the village to visit?

Yes.

Do they demand things? chickens etc.

I haven't seen any demands like that.

You were just there [the BGF camp] for sentry duty and they asked you to collect vegetables?

Yes.

How about cooking? Did they feed you curry?

Yes. As for food, [I] can eat any time [when I am there].

Are there only Karen [soldiers]? Or are there Burmese [soldiers] as well?

There are no [Burmese soldiers].

Do you know the battalion number and their leader's name?

I have no idea as they change often. I was there just a little while and they asked me to collect vegetables.

How many times have you been on sentry duty?

In the past I had to go for [sentry] duty too. If the time comes, I have to go.

[After performing duty at the BGF camp], how long is it before you have to go again?

Over one month.

How many people [have to go to the camp] for duty per day?

Today there were three people, because the other person could not come.

So there were three people?

Yes. If you are busy with travelling [you can be absent], but at least two people always [have to go]. Sometimes, if support for work at the monastery is needed then people have to go and do that.

You do farming for your livelihood; does [the farm produce] enough [rice] each year?

No, it is not going well for me.

Is that only [true for] you? Or for other friends as well?

Yes, there are many people who are not doing well [with farming]. In the village here, few people are doing well [with farming].

How many hundred houses are there in the village?

There are many houses.

How come you do not have enough [rice] each year? How does it happen?

The work is not going well as there are problems with farming, I just do hill farming.

Do you have farmland?

No, I just cut trees and do cultivation.

So you don't own any farmland?

No, I don't have my own farmland. I just do hill farming in different areas each year.

How about rice? Are there things that destroy the paddy? Is hill farming good?

It's not very good and land in this area not good for hill farming. The soil is not fertile.

So you do not have enough rice because of the soil quality?

Yes, the soil is not good.

How did that happen? Are there no places near here that have [good quality soil] for farming?

Yes, there are, but there are many people and not much land that has good soil quality, and [because people in the area practice slash and burn agriculture], if the conditions of the soil get a little better for farming then the villagers clear the area.

Is anything causing problems with that process? How about other crops? Are there there any companies that have planted trees [for commercial purposes]?

There is no [commercial agriculture being conducted by] companies, but some villagers plant rubber trees.

Do many people plant rubber trees?

Yes.

Do the rubber plantations cause problems for farmers or other people? Do they cause problems for you and your farming?

I can do hill farming outside [of the village].

Are you free to do hill farming outside of the village? Are there problems with that? For example, if you burn the forest for farming do you have to worry about the fire consuming those rubber trees?

Yes, I do.

How about places that have good quality soil for farming, do people plant rubber trees there?

Those places are far away and people cannot usually reach there.

How about the areas surrounding the rubber plantations? Do [the rubber plantations] damage other places like work places [agricultural plots]?

There might be some problems with the rubber plantations.

Do you plant [rubber trees] as well?

No, I don't.

Do people who plant rubber trees usually have money? I mean, do poor ordinary people do it [plant rubber trees]?

Some ordinary people plant rubber trees.

Do some people who have a little money plant [rubber trees]?

People who are strong enough [financially] to establish [rubber plantations] do.

Do many people in this area plant rubber trees?

Yes, a lot.

Do people from almost every house plant rubber trees?

No, not every house. Many people do not plant rubber trees, rubber planting is not easy work.

You don't have enough food [rice], so how do you plan your daily food [subsistence]?

If there is daily wage work available, I just do it.

In the village, provided by other villagers?

Yes.

How much do they pay per day?

They pay 2,500 kyat⁴ (US \$2.57) or sometimes they pay 3,000 kyat (US \$3.08).

So the maximum is 3,000 kyat?

Yes, per day.

Burmese money?

Yes.

Do companies come in for business and [offer daily] wage work?

No, there are no companies coming into the area to do business with benefits for the villagers. They did logging and cut bamboo in the past but there was no benefit for the villagers. They use cars [trucks]. They cut trees and bamboo with chain saws and it is finished [there are no opportunities for employment of local villagers in that process].

⁴ All conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report are based on the 19th August 2014 official market rate of 973 kyat to the US \$1.

It [the work] is finished when they cut [the trees and bamboo] with the chain saws, so there is nothing left for the villagers to do?

Yes. [they are done and there is nothing left to do]

How much is it for one big tin⁵ of rice if you have to buy it?

Seven thousand [kyat] (US \$7.19)

Seven thousand for one big tin of rice?

Yes.

How about chicken? How much for one viss⁶ of chicken?

Five thousand [kyat] (US \$5.13).

How about pork?

The pork price is not stable. Sometimes the elders [village heads] limit the price to 2,500 kyat and sometimes 3,000 kyat including [delivery] service.

Do you have to do day labour [sometimes]?

Sometimes; there is no way of [earning an] income. I cannot think of any other way of [earning an] income. Some people in the lower part [of the village] do trade selling [things].

Is there a school in this area?

Yes, there is a big school.

How many grades does it have?

I don't know. You should ask the school assistance committee.

Do you have children that go to school?

Yes, one of my children.

What standard [grade] is he/she in?

Second standard.

How much are the expenses per year? How much do you have to pay in school fees?

Sometimes, they ask the students [to pay registration fees], some years they ask for 1,300 [kyat] (US \$1.34), which is strange and different. They [only] asked for two baskets⁷ of rice per house in the past.

You have to pay with two basket of rice [as well as the registration fee]?

⁵ A big tin is a unit of volume used to measure paddy, milled rice and seeds. One big tin is equivalent to 10.45 kg. or 23.04 lb. of paddy, and 16 kg. or 35.2 lb. of milled rice.

⁶ A *viss* is a unit of weight equivalent to 1.6 kg. or 3.52 lb.

⁷ A basket is a unit of volume used to measure paddy, milled rice and seeds. One basket is equivalent to 20.9 kg. or 46.08 lb. of paddy, and 32 kg. or 70.4 lb. of milled rice.

Yes.

Each house?

Yes.

For one student?

Yes.

What if there is more than one student?

It is the same. The whole village pays for that.

Two basket of rice? Do you mean that if you have one child that goes to school you have to pay the same amount, but you still have to pay [even] if you do not have children that go to school?

Yes.

They have to pay two basket of rice?

Yes.

Do you have to buy the books for your children by yourself? Or do they [the school] provide all of them?

[We] have to buy them ourselves.

Is it a private school or government school?

I haven't met with the school committee and I don't know [if it is a private or a government school].

Do Burmese soldiers [Tatmadaw] come into your village?

They came last year.

How about this year?

They haven't come this year.

Do you know the monthly salary for a BGF soldier?

I have no idea.

Did you see them buying things [food] when you were with them?

Yes, they buy [food] sometimes.

They did not pay you [wages] when you stayed with them?

No, they didn't. We just fulfilled our duty.

Did they threaten you when you stayed with them?

No.

Did they ask you to carry water or cook?

Yes, [we] had to do it. Sometimes, they do it themselves. If I see things to do then I just do them and if they see [work which needs to be done] they just do it.

Did they ask you to find things [vegetables]?

Yes, sometimes we have to collect vegetables.

Did they buy [pay for] those things [vegetables]?

No they didn't.

Have you ever heard about them threatening villagers?

I don't know.

What do you think about the current situation and the situation in the past? I mean about the ceasefire. Is it [the current situation] the same as before?

There were a lot of worrying situations and things to be afraid of in the past.

Why were there a lot of worrying situations and things to be afraid of in the past?

Because we were not happy to be with [act as a sentry for] them [the BGF] and sometimes if they came we had to [work as] porters with them and we were afraid of it.

What if fighting happened? Did villagers have more fear if there was fighting?

Yes, the villagers had to be afraid because they had to carry things [for the soldiers].

How about now? Do people have to carry and transport [things as porters]?

No, they don't. There is only sentry [duty].

Do you [villagers] have to stay with them [the BGF]?

Yes.

How long has [it been since villagers were last forced to] carry and transport [things as porters]?

Last year. It has been over one year.

Where do they [the BGF] get food and rice when they are in your village?

[Army bases] in the lower part [urban areas] transport it to them.

From the lower part [urban areas]?

Yes.

Do they go and get them [rations] by themselves or do they ask the villagers to carry them?

They [army bases] support them maybe.

So you don't know?

No, I don't. Last time [people from] Htee Poe [village had to help them]

You have never done it?

No but I did go and get some rations with an oxcart once.

Really?

Yes.

Was it last year?

It was in the rainy season.

What did you have to transport? What rations?

Rice.

Where did you have to go and get it?

At an old checkpoint at [a person called] C---'s shop.

Is it [the place] called Meh P'Ree Hta? Or What?

It is called D--- [village]. It is in the lower part of D---.

Did people bring [the rice to] the riverside for them?

Yes.

And did you have to go and get it by oxcart?

Yes.

How many ox carts had to go?

One oxcart, because there was not that much rice. It was only three sacks.

Was it finished in one journey?

Yes.

Did they pay for that?

No, they [the BGF] didn't pay but those who went and transported [the rations from the riverside] did not need to go for sentry [duty].

Do you think they [the BGF] received a salary from the Burmese [Tatmadaw]?

I think the Burmese [Tatmadaw probably did provide a salary]. They [the Tatmadaw probably] supported them.

Do you think it is right that they asked you [to go and get the rations] for free?

It is not right.

They should have paid money for hiring you. They did not pay you to go and get [rations]; was it the same way with your friends [who also had to go]?

No.

Were they friendly with you when you were with them [for sentry duty]? Did they talk with you nicely or were they angry [with you]?

The group [of soldiers] that I was with [during my sentry duty] were not angry.

And they didn't reprimand you?

No, they didn't.

Last time when you transported [rations] for them, where did you have to bring them to?

To their place.

B--- [village]?

Yes.

How many days did it take you to transport the rations?

[I finished it] within one day.

It took only one day?

Yes, it did not take the whole day. Because it was [not far], just from the village to the riverside.

Is it only rice [that you have to transport]?

Sometimes it includes oil [or petrol].

Did you have to go with you own oxcart?

I was the sentry and I had to follow the oxcart.

So the oxcart owner was another person?

Yes. I had to push the oxcart if the oxcart was stuck in the mud.

Did they [the BGF] go as well?

No.

Were there only rations [on the oxcart]?

Yes.

How long does [one group of soldiers] stay before they rotate? How often do they [rotate]? Or do they not rotate?

Yes they rotate but I don't know how long it takes.

Do they notify you if they rotate?

I don't know about that.

Do they inform the village head?

Yes, they inform the village head.

How much young rattan did you have to collect [this morning]?

Eleven bundles.

How much money will you make if you sell them in the town? Do people in town buy them?

Yes, they do.

How much do they pay for each bundle?

It should be 500 kyat for two bundles.

So one bundle is 250 kyat?

Yes.

So if you sell those bundles you can make about 2000 kyat and you can also buy two packets of MSG (Monosodium Glutamate, a naturally occurring food flavouring)?

Yes.

They paid you nothing? They never pay you money [so you can buy] MSG packets?

No.

Did they feed you other food sometimes with mercy and sympathy for your family?

No, never. I don't know if they pay other people [who go to the camp for sentry duty].

Do they stay in villager's houses or their place [camp] during the day or do they go around and visit people?

They go around during the day.

How about at night? Do they sleep in villager's houses?

In the past they slept in villagers' houses at night.

How about now? Do they have a good place [camp] of their own?

They [improved] the roof of their [camp].

Did they order you [villagers] to go and roof [the camp] for them?

I did not have to go.

How about other people? Did they have to go?

Yes, some sentries had to do [that].

So when your time came [for sentry duty] it [the roofing] was already finished.

Yes.

How about thatch shingles? Did they assign a quota for the villagers [to provide them]?

I don't know about that. You should ask the village head.

So you have never had to provide [thatch shingles]?

No.

When you went for sentry [duty] who did your work for you?

At home?

Yes, your home or your farm.

No one did it for me.

Were you able to do your work the next day?

Yes.

Is it OK when you sleep in your hut [at night] on your farm when your work requires that you stay [there]?

Yes.

How about in the past? Like you said before when you had to porter [for soldiers], and there was fighting and fear over the past two or three years?

Yes, it was OK but I had to be careful.

Did you feel safe? Did you worry?

I was afraid.

Is it OK now?

Yes.

For example if you travel at night, do you have to ask permission?

No, it is OK.

How about in the past?

They had a curfew. If the situation was not safe they did not allow [people to] go out during the [curfew] period. They [soldiers] said that if you wanted to go out, to take a flare [or touch light] with you.

They said that?

Yes.

Now, there are no such things [restrictions]?

No.

Can you go anywhere you like?

I can go hunting for frogs [or go fishing] at night.

In your village, do you see any way that the Burma government is improving your village? Do they support your village with things that need improvement?

I don't know about that and I haven't seen any improvements that they have made. [The villagers] have to struggle very hard.

How about the KNU [Karen National Union]? Do they come into the village?

Yes, they came in the past.

How about now?

Yes, they come sometimes.

Do they ever reprimand the villagers?

No.

Do they demand things to eat?

No. They [the KNU] are very kind.

If the KNU come in the village when they [the BGF] are in the village, do you have to worry [that they will fight each other]?

I don't know about that but I am secretly afraid.

Very afraid?

No.

How about in the past, if they [the KNU] came into the village when [the BGF] was in the village?

There was worry [about fighting].

A lot of worrying?

Yes, a lot of worrying and we had to be careful.

How long has the situation been different for you?

I think it has been just one year.

In the past if they [armed actors] met each other and fighting happened, did the villagers have to face horrible [situations]?

Yes.

Did fighting ever happen in your village in the past one or two years?

No it did not.

Now, are there places that it is forbidden to go to because there are landmines?

I don't know about landmines. In the past there used to be explosions often during the conflict. I don't go to collect cardamom [in the plantation because of the risk of landmines].

Have [any armed actors] notified villagers of any new landmines [recently]?

No, I have not heard anything.

Do you have anything more to say?

No, I think there is nothing special that I have to mention.

If so, thank you.

Thanks.

Further background reading on the situation in Hpapun District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- "Violent abuse and forced labour in Hpapun District, November 2013 – January 2014," (September 2014)
- "Hpapun Situation Update: Dwe Lo Township, August to October 2013," (August 2014)
- "Hpapun Incident Report: Forced labour and violent abuse in Bu Tho Township, January 2014," (August 2014)
- "Hpapun Interview: U A---, July 2013," (August 2014)
- "Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, August to November 2013," (August 2014)
- "Hpapun Interview: Naw S---, September 2013," (August 2014)

Mu Traw (Hpapun) District



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