



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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**Interview**

November 2, 2016 / KHRG Log #15-122-A1-11

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**Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Naw K---, October 2015**

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*This Interview with Naw K--- describes events occurring in K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, during October 2015, including Karen women's roles, the 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement, healthcare, and the 2015 general election.*

- *Karen women who live in the local area usually stay at home to look after their children and do housework. After they get married they cannot earn a living independently.*
  - *Even after the 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement local women villagers who live in K'Ser Doh Township do not feel that they are safe to travel alone between villages.*
  - *Naw K--- suggested to the local leaders that the Karen National Union (KNU) and Burma/Myanmar government should provide more healthcare services and healthcare awareness for local villagers.*
  - *Naw K--- decided not to vote in the 2015 general election because she did not feel that it was relevant to her and she was unsure as to which party she should vote for.*
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**Interview | Naw K---, (female, 22), Y--- village, K'Ser Doh Township, Mergui-Tavoy District (October 2015)**

*The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Toungoo District on October 14<sup>th</sup> 2015 and is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.<sup>1</sup> This Interview was received along with other information from Toungoo District, including five other interviews, four incident reports, one situation update, 346 photographs and 36 video clips.<sup>2</sup>*

**Ethnicity:** Karen

**Religion:** Christian

**Marital Status:** Single

**Occupation:** Health worker

**Position:** Unknown

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<sup>1</sup> KHRG trains community members in southeast 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.

<sup>2</sup> In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in southeast 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.

**Can you give us your name? What is your name?**

Naw<sup>3</sup> K---

**How old are you?**

22 years old.

**Your township?**

K'Ser Doh Township.

**Have you had a chance to look at any of our previous thematic reports, such as *Losing Ground* or *With Only our Voices*?<sup>4</sup>**

Yes, I have had a chance to look at them.

**Do you think it is a good idea to write a thematic report about women's perspectives of human rights<sup>5</sup>?**

Yes, it is good.

**Why do you think it is important that KHRG presents women's voices?**

It is important because people discriminate against women so it is good to present women's voices.

**What roles do women generally play in society, what are their duties in Karen culture, and what do women do throughout the day?**

Women who get married usually do housework, and women who are single work in the plain farms and hill farms.

**What kinds of things do they do if they have families?**

They look after their children.

**If they are single, do they work in the field?**

Yes.

**Can you help us understand what women and men can and cannot do in terms of the family, the home, and the village?**

Women cannot do hard work like labour work, and men are not familiar with housework so they cannot do housework.

**What about money? Do women manage the money in the household?**

I don't understand what you mean by "managing the money."

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<sup>3</sup> Naw is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name.

<sup>4</sup> "Losing Ground: Land conflicts and collective action in eastern Myanmar," KHRG, March 2013; "'With only our voices, what can we do?': Land confiscation and local response in southeast Myanmar," KHRG, June 2015.

<sup>5</sup> The researcher is referring to KHRG's 2016 thematic "[Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women's perspectives from southeast Myanmar](#)," August 2016.

**For example, the husbands go to work and they come back and give money to their wives. How do the women manage that money?**

Some husbands will give money to their wives to save it, but some of the men do not give any money to their wives. As you know, there are many different kinds of families.

**So does it depend on the family's structure?**

Yes.

**What about at the village level? Do women take on responsibilities in the village or in the village tract? So not only in the families, we also want to know about the roles of women in the village?**

At the present time, most women take on responsibility working with the Karen Women's Organisation [KWO]. They share their knowledge and organise groups of women in the villages.

**Do you ever see women in the role of village head or other administrative functions?**

I have never seen a woman in the role of village head.

**So you have never seen women in positions of responsibility, such as village head? They are always men?**

Yes.

**So, do you think that women are not allowed to, or do you think that it is because women feel uncomfortable asking to have a position of responsibility?**

I think women are not allowed to take on roles of responsibility. If they were allowed to, women would be taking on more positions of responsibility. Currently, we can see that the KNU [Karen National Union] secretary is a woman, so if Burma/Myanmar administrators at the local level allowed women to take on more positions of responsibility, such as the role of village head, I think they would take it.

**How is this issue different between the KNU and the Burma/Myanmar government?**

We have seen changes taking place in terms of women's roles, but as for the KNU, they are always under the control of other people [such as the Burma/Myanmar government]. Women from the KNU-controlled areas find it more difficult to enjoy their rights.

**So the women in the KNU-controlled areas do not have the same chance to be active [holding positions of responsibility]?**

They do, but there are fewer opportunities for them.

**So, the women who live in Burma/Myanmar government-controlled areas have more opportunities to be active?**

The women from the Burma/Myanmar government-controlled areas always speak [publicly] in front of other people [during public meetings].

**As you are young, you know women who are around 20 years old. How do you think women of your generation are different compared with women of your parents' generation? What has changed do you think?**

What has changed is that in the past, women struggled for their lives [physical security and livelihoods because of conflict] but they struggled and worked together, but now, the young people do whatever they want.

**Why do you think that has changed?**

In our township the young people do not work together or support each other very much. They feel depressed and do not want to support each other. Young people should have a strong desire to work together, but now, many young people [who used to work at the township level] have returned to their own places [villages].

**Do you think women are more independent from their families now than they were in the past?**

Yes, women are more independent now.

**So, do you think the community, and especially the men, allow this new independence for women and their changing roles? Do the community and the men accept the changing roles that women now have?**

I'm not sure whether they accept it or not.

**What do you think are the biggest challenges that Karen women such as yourself are facing?**

The challenges that they face relate to militarisation, because if their husbands are soldiers they always have to go to the front line, which can cause problems when their children are ill and they can face financial and livelihood problems. I have seen that one woman in my township, her husband always goes to the front line and when their children are unwell they have no rice to eat. She came to our area asking for rice, so it caused problems for her.

**What are the healthcare problems for women?**

Women face problems regarding healthcare because they do not have money.

**When you say "money", are you talking about their livelihoods or their ability to buy food, pay rent etc.?**

Yes, [their ability to buy food].

**Is this because women cannot go out and work and earn their own income, or where else do these problems about a lack of money come from?**

They do not do anything, and they also do not have their own land to work on to [earn] a living. They only have access to the land that belongs to their parents, but they do not stay with their parents [after they get married].

**So access to the land is an issue for women?**

Yes.

**Why do women not have access to land?**

No, [that is not correct]. Women can access land but the problem is that if they, for example, have two children and their children are very small, they cannot work on the land because they have to take care of their children.

**You mentioned something about women who married soldiers and who did not have enough food. Is it common for Karen women to marry soldiers? And then the soldiers go to the front line, and when they go, women may not have enough food?**

I am not sure.

**What do you think is needed in order for Karen women to improve their lives? What do you think needs to happen?**

They need jobs.

**Do you think anything has improved for women since the 2012 preliminary ceasefire?<sup>6</sup>**

I think there have been some changes because currently women are becoming leaders, like secretary or joint secretary [of different organisations]. In the past, people did not value women.

**Do you think the new national ceasefire [Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA)]<sup>7</sup> will make life better for women?**

I am not sure whether it can make women's lives better or not.

**What do you think about human rights for Karen women? What human rights are they seeking?**

They are seeking independence [for Karen State from the Burma/Myanmar government].

**Can you vote in your township [for the Burma/Myanmar government's 2015 general election]?**

Yes, we can. The township administrator asked us to vote but we do not want to vote.

**Are you on the voter list?**

Maybe we are on the list because we have Burma/Myanmar ID cards.

**Is your township administrator from the KNU or Burma/Myanmar government?**

They are a KNU township administrator.

**Do you have a Burma/Myanmar government ID card?**

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<sup>6</sup> The KHRG community member is referring to the preliminary ceasefire agreement that was signed on January 12<sup>th</sup> 2012 between the KNU and the Myanmar government in Hpa-an. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the preliminary ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014.

<sup>7</sup> On October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups and on-going conflicts in ethnic regions, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between the Myanmar government and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited to the negotiation table, including the KNU, see "[Myanmar signs ceasefire with eight armed groups](#)," Reuters, October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015. Despite the signing of the NCA prompting a positive response from the international community, see "[Myanmar: UN chief welcomes 'milestone' signing of ceasefire agreement](#)," *UN News Centre*, October 15<sup>th</sup> 2015, KNU Chairman General Saw Mutu Say Poe's decision to sign has been met with strong opposition from other members of the Karen armed resistance and civil society groups alike, who believe the decision to be undemocratic and the NCA itself to be a superficial agreement that risks undermining a genuine peace process, see "[Without Real Political Roadmap, Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement Leads Nowhere...](#)," *Karen News*, September 1<sup>st</sup> 2015. The signing of the NCA followed the January 12<sup>th</sup> 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an.

Yes, I do.

**Why do you not want to vote?**

I am not sure if I should vote for the KNU [Karen People's Party]<sup>8</sup> or the Burma/Myanmar government [political parties] or which group is good for me, so I'm not going to vote.

**Do any of your friends plan to vote?**

Yes, some of them plan to vote.

**Do you and your female friends ever talk about the election or ceasefire? Do you ever discuss these things with each other?**

Yes, we have discussed the [2012 preliminary] ceasefire which was signed to stop the fighting. It was good to sign it, so that there are fewer [negative] effects on the villagers. Some of my friends said they decided to vote, but as for me, I said I do not want to vote because I do not understand everything that is related to the election.

**Do you think the election is relevant to you as a Karen person and as a Karen woman?**

No.

**Why not?**

Because I feel like the Burma/Myanmar government do not usually keep their promises.

**What do you think about Naw Si Po Ra Sein?<sup>9</sup> Do you think she is a strong woman to look up to?**

Yes, she is a strong woman to look up to, but I do not know what [her] role is in detail.

**Are there any Karen women that you look up to? It could be family members, someone in your village, or it could be Aung San Suu Kyi? I do not know what Karen women you see as role models.**

Aung San Suu Kyi is a good person to look up to.

**What do you think about the 2012 preliminary ceasefire and 2015 [Nationwide] Ceasefire [Agreement] as a woman? I know we have talked about it already but we just want to hear your perspective of it?**

I cannot say.

**Has anyone explained to you about the peace process and the [2015 NCA] ceasefire? Do you feel like anyone has helped you to understand it?**

Yes, I often go to the refugee camps and villages with my township administrator to give peace awareness [trainings].

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<sup>8</sup> The Karen (or Kayin) People's Party is one of four ethnic Karen political parties represented in the Burmese government, currently holding single legislative seat. Traditionally the KPP represents those Karen communities living outside of Karen State: Rangoon, Irrawaddy, and Bago regions, as well as Mon State where there is a Karen population. Saw Htun Aung Myint, the party's chairman, once served as a colonel in the Burmese Navy.

<sup>9</sup> Naw Si Po Ra Sein is the vice chairman of the KNU.

**Let's talk about militarisation and freedom of movement. Do you think that it affects women and men differently in any way? Do women feel less secure carrying food? Can women travel alone or do they travel with another person because they feel worried about their safety?**

I think there is no safety for women.

**So you do not feel safe travelling alone as a woman?**

Yes [correct], we do not feel safe.

**So do you travel with another woman or a man if you go from one village to another village?**

Yes, we go with our friends.

**Would men travel alone from one village to another village?**

I think the men do not worry [about travelling alone].

**What is your general view of healthcare? Do you access KNU clinics or Burma/Myanmar government clinics, and what is your opinion of them?**

In my village there is no KNU clinic because it [my village] is located in a Burma/Myanmar government-controlled area, so if we are not feeling well we usually go to a Burma/Myanmar government clinic.

**What do you think about access to healthcare for women? Do they ever provide education about women's health, and do you think you can access the specific healthcare that you need as a woman?**

When I was in my village many groups came to provide education about healthcare, for example UNICEF and nurses, but since I left my village in 2013, I do not know whether they still come to provide that education or not.

**What about if a woman is pregnant? Have you heard about complications related to pregnancy or childbirth?**

No, I have not heard about such complications.

**So, do you think you have adequate access to healthcare at the Burma/Myanmar government clinic?**

I do not know about access to healthcare at the Burma/Myanmar government clinic, but if we want to work as nurses or medics we have to apply for jobs and if they accept us then we can do the job.

**So, do you ever go to the Burma/Myanmar government clinic?**

Yes, in our area.

**Do you have to pay to use the clinic?**

Yes.

**How much do you have to pay?**

If we stay in a special room we have to pay 100,000 kyat [US \$80.16].<sup>10</sup>

**Do you think healthcare should be free? Do you think you should have to pay for it? Do you think women should have to pay for healthcare?**

For the people who do not have money, I think they should not have to pay for healthcare, but because of what we know about the Burma/Myanmar government, we have to pay for healthcare.

**Do you have any suggestions for how to make healthcare better for women? Do you need more access or more medicine?**

There is a hospital in my village, but at the township level we would suggest that there should be more medicine, and that more healthcare-related education is carried out.

**Did you go to university?**

No.

**Upper secondary school?**

Yes.

**So which standard<sup>11</sup> did you finish in upper secondary school?**

Standard 10.

**Did you go to a KNU school or a Burma/Myanmar government school?**

Burma/Myanmar government school.

**What do you think about access to education for women? Do you think women have enough opportunities to go to school?**

Which part?

**For example in your township or district, do they have opportunities to go to school?**

Some people who have money, they can go to school. But the people who do not have money cannot. In the KNU-controlled areas, if they pass Standards 8 or 10, the KNU support them to continue their studies. Currently, there is an upper secondary in Ler Mu Lah Township which is a KNU school.

**Do you think there are any challenges for girls to access education that boys do not face?**

Some people face challenges to access education because of financial problems and so they cannot get enough education.

**Do you think families prioritise education more for boys or girls if they have little money?**

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<sup>10</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 11 October 2016 official market rate of 1,247.50 kyat to US \$1.

<sup>11</sup> A standard refers to a school year in the education system of Myanmar. The basic education system has a 5-4-2 structure. Primary school runs from Standard 1 to Standard 5, lower secondary school is Standards 6-9, and upper secondary school is Standards 10-11.

They prioritise education for both, even if they don't have much money.

**So there is no discrimination?**

Yes [correct].

**We want to understand how human rights may affect women and men differently.**

What do you mean by "differently"?

**For example, in terms of forced labour, women have to porter more than men. Men do not have to do porter as much as women.**

Actually more men than women have to do porter service.

**How do you think women are affected by forced labour? How is it different if it happens to them [directly] or if it happens to their husbands?**

If it happens to their husbands, it will cause livelihood problems for them.

**So is that because men usually work in the fields and women usually stay home?**

Yes.

**Who do you think is more likely to be injured by landmines? Men or women, and why?**

Mostly men are injured by landmines because they are always active and working [in the fields and forests].

**If a woman is injured by a landmine so that she can no longer work at home, what will happen to her if she can no longer take care of the house and family?**

If women are injured by landmines so that they can no longer take care of the family, it will cause problems for both men and women as they do not work in the same roles. If the men go to work in the field they cannot do housework either.

**So if men step on landmines and cannot work in the fields and they have to stay home, women have to go to work in the fields and farms, right?**

Yes, it is also a problem for women to work in the farms and do housework as they cannot do both things at the same time.

**What about land confiscation? Do you think women are ever targeted to have their land confiscated just because they are women?**

I do not think so.

**So in your township or district do you see cases of rape or other forms of sexual violence against women?**

Yes, sometimes it happens between villagers.

**So you never see the soldiers or other people in positions of authority do it?**

No, I have never seen that.

**Do you think women feel vulnerable or safe in your village?**

I think [women] usually [feel unsafe near] the army camps.

**So women feel vulnerable when there are army camps based near their villages?**

No [correct]. They do not feel safe when army camps are based near their villages.

**What strategies do women use to feel safer?**

In order for women to feel safe they have organised themselves and founded a group [where they discuss] how to protect themselves, and they also give awareness trainings [to the other villagers].

**Can you explain a bit more about that? Do you have any examples?**

In my area, one of the representatives from KWO [Karen Women Organisation] who works with KWO came and gave a training session to raise awareness about sexual violence and organised the women into groups. They meet up each evening for a Christian service and they live in unity and protect each other from sexual violence.

**Are women in your village and your community interested in KWO? Do they have a strong relationship with them?**

Yes, we have a strong relationship with the KWO.

**Do you and your female friends feel comfortable discussing rape cases with each other or in the community after it has happened?**

No, they do not feel comfortable discussing rape.

**Why not?**

They feel shy talking about it in front of other people, and sometimes they even feel uncomfortable talking to their own friends about it.

**If women are raped, do they face any form of discrimination in the community?**

Yes.

**How?**

After they are raped, they feel like they have lost their dignity and that their lives are not pure anymore.

**How does the community treat them differently?**

I don't know.

**Women who are victims of sexual violence, are they supported by their families or their communities?**

Yes, some of them are supported by their families and their communities.

**What kind of support?**

They encourage them.

**What informal strategies do you think Karen women use to prevent or respond to these challenges? For example, you mentioned working together or going to the KWO and using warning systems. Can you think of any other examples?**

I do not know [any other examples] so I cannot say.

**What about legal strategies to protect themselves from land confiscation, for example, registering their land? Can you think of any other ways in which women make use of the legal system to protect themselves or their property?**

Most of them ask for advice from the leaders on how to protect their land and they also ask them to provide land titles for them.

**Do you feel more comfortable going to the KNU legal system or the [Burma/Myanmar] government legal system?**

If we ask for advice from the government side we have to pay them money, but from the KNU side, I mostly see that people do not have to pay money.

**Do you think women are treated differently under the law?**

No.

**What do you think is the biggest way in which women are discriminated against in Karen State?**

In the past, women always had to stay behind the men and that was how they were discriminated against, but now, women can work [in the same way] as men.

**What do you think is important for us to include in our report on women's perspectives of human rights abuses? What would you like us to report about?**

I cannot say because I do not have much experience.

**Are you proud to be a Karen women?**

Yes.

**Why?**

I am very proud to be a Karen woman because we can understand many languages. The Bamar people, they do not understand Karen language.

**What do you think Karen women can or should do to make Karen State a better place for all Karen people?**

Many women should get involved in many different things to make it a better place.

**Do you have any questions for us about our upcoming thematic report?**

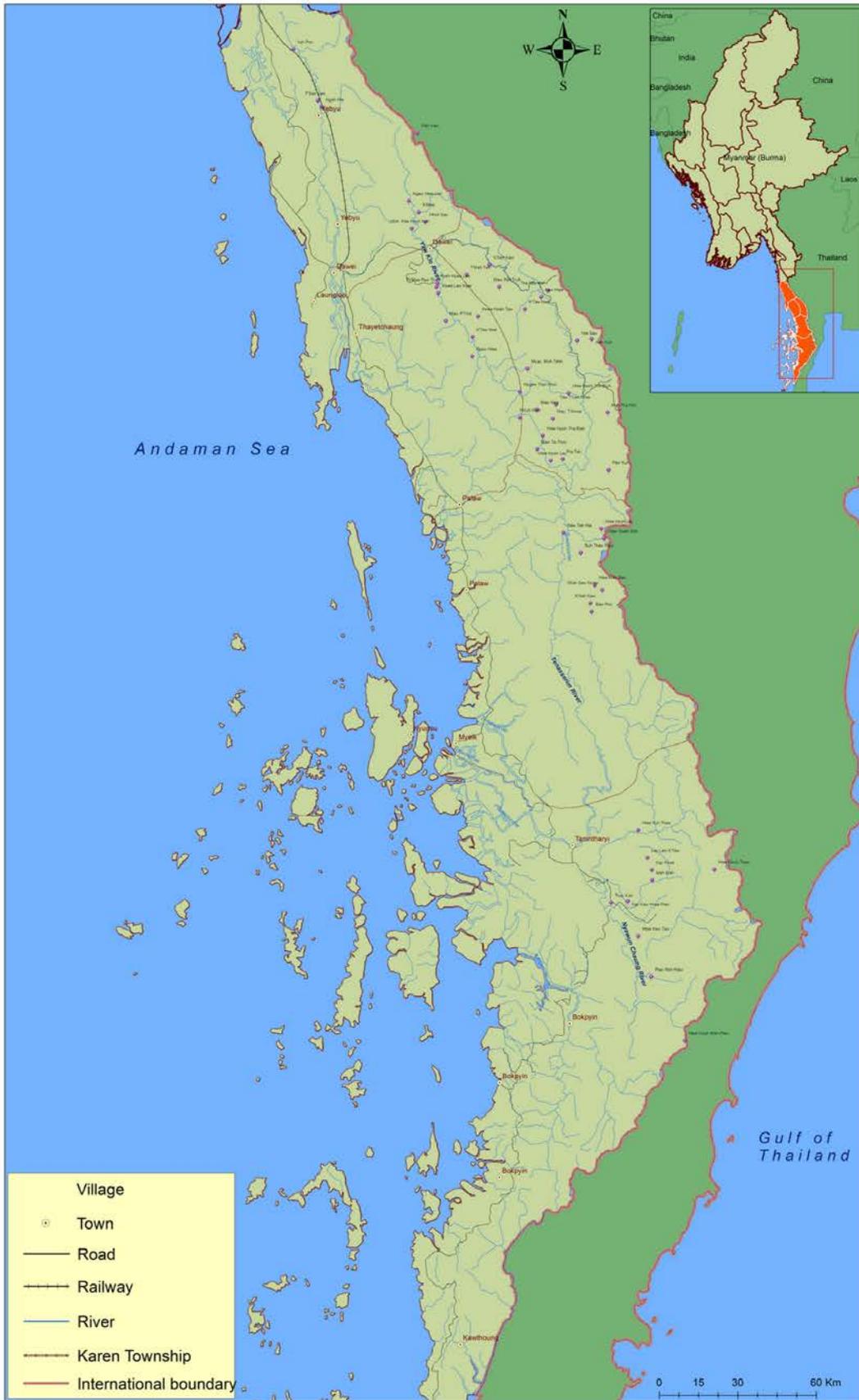
I cannot think of any.

**If you think of anything you can ask us over the next few days. Ok thank you very much.**

Further background reading on the situation in Mergui-Tavoy District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- “Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Naw W---, October 2015,” (October 2016)
- “Ongoing Militarisation In Southeast Myanmar,” KHRG, (October 2016)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ler Muh Lah Township, November 2015 To January 2016,” (August 2016)
- “Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women’s testimonies from southeast Myanmar,” KHRG, (August 2016)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ler Doh Soh Township, June to November 2015,” (July 2016)

Mergui/Tavoy (Thanintharyi) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)