



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

August 11, 2015 / KHRG #15-15-A2-I1

Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, January 2015

This Interview with Saw A--- describes events and issues occurring in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District, during January 2015, including improvements in education, villager opinions about the ceasefire, and land confiscation.

- *The Karen Education Department (KED) said they will raise each teachers' salaries from 4,500 baht (US \$133.48) to 7,500 baht (US \$222.47) per year starting in 2014 in B--- village.*
 - *Saw A--- expressed his opinion on the ceasefire agreement between the Burma/Myanmar government and the Karen National Union (KNU), saying that he does not have faith in the current ceasefire.*
 - *Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #340 confiscated villagers' land in Hpapun area and put up a sign declaring it to be the battalion's land. The villagers remain the legal landlords but the LIB is exercising de-facto control. The interviewee's brother had submitted a complaint about this to the KNU Land Department several times in 2014 and, although he was told the land will be returned, there has been no observed progress towards land reclamation or compensation.*
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Interview | Saw A---, (male, 42), B--- village, Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District (January 2015)

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 January 2015 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, one incident report, one situation update, and 107 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Hill field farmer

Position: [C---] area leader

¹ 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.

² 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.

What is your name?

Saw A---

How old are you?

42 years old.

What do the people call your village?

B--- village.

What is your nationality?

Karen.

What is your religion?

I am Buddhist.

What do you do?

I farm.

What about village tract?

Hkaw Poo village tract.

What township?

Bu Tho Township.

What district?

Mu Traw [Hpapun] District.

What brigade?

Brigade #5.

Do you have a family?

Yes.

How many children do you have?

Six children.

What is the age of your oldest child?

14 years old.

What is the age of your youngest child?

Five years old.

How many households are there in your village?

[censored for security].

How many [people] are there in your village?

147 people.

Do you have any responsibility in your village?

Yes, D--- [village tract] elected me as C--- area leader.

How many years have you been working as area leader?

Four years already.

As area leader, did the villagers elect you or did other groups of people [KNU] appoint you as a leader?

The villagers elected me. In the years before I was the leader they [the villagers] decided that the people who are elected to be area leaders can [only] serve for three years as area leader. The person who was the area leader [prior to me] had been [area leader] for many years already, so he asked me to replace him. I told him that before I replaced [him] I would have to ask the permission of the villagers, [I said], *"If many villagers allow me to replace you I will do it, but if they do not want me to replace you I will not do it."* Since many villagers selected me I took this job.

Do you get paid as area leader?

No.

As you are the area leader, tell me about your area's situation?

The situation in our area is the same as before. As I understand, area leaders are meant to assist the village tract leader. I feel like a son of the villager tract leader. They [village tract leaders] are not able to do all their work, so they pass some work to their sons [area leaders]. Sons [area leaders] do some work for the father [village tract leader] and [they] work together.

What do the villagers do to earn their living?

They mostly farm and cultivate [their] farms.

Do they have enough food for a year?

Some years they have enough food, but some years they do not have enough food, so they [have to] borrow rice from their neighbours.

What percentage of [people have] enough food and [what percentage do] not [have] enough food? Which group is bigger?

In the past there were fewer with not enough food. In the years since 2000, the [soil on the land that they are] working has [deteriorated in quality]. Therefore, the number [of people with]

enough food has decreased, while the percentage of [people suffering from] food insecurity is increasing.

What do they [villagers] do when they do not have enough food?

I have observed things in C--- area in villages such as E---, B--- and F--- villages. These three villages lent rice to each other and love one another. At the end of the year they returned the rice back [to those who had lent it to them]. In 2010 it was a bad year for us. Many villagers did not have enough food that year. So we reported it to the village tract [leaders] and they again reported it to the above [higher-up, township] leaders. Later the leaders donated some money to us and we bought rice. That was very helpful for us.

So they could survive that year?

Yes they did, even though they [villagers] were in debt [to their neighbours] that year they were able to pay it back. So in that year everything went well.

Did they only donate that [particular] year?

Yes, only in that year because it was very hard for us.

Which group of leaders? Was it KNU or [Burma/Myanmar] government?

KNU leaders; as I know [the donations were] from KORD [Karen Office of Relief and Development]. It is a group from the central [Hpapun] District [headquarters].

Which year?

Four years ago. I guess it was in 2010.

What about after 2010, have the villagers done well for [themselves]?

As I said, even though they have not had enough food [at times] they [have] borrowed from neighbours year by year. They are able to help each other.

So in that area [C---] the villagers are able to look after their neighbours?

Yes.

Are the villagers able to work freely for their living?

Yes. Nowadays they are able to work freely. We are not disturbed by the enemy.

You said enemy; what kind of enemy?

The Tatmadaw.

They [villagers] work freely?

Yes.

For how many years have they been [able to] work freely?

A few years as [far as] I know. I think the Tatmadaw might control us in a soft [less intrusive] way. This is what I think.

How do they control you “in a soft way”?

Them controlling [us] in a soft way means that they have given us opportunities and permission to travel [or work] freely. In the past we were afraid to go to [travel to] Hpapun [Town]. Nowadays they give us [that] opportunity.

Now the villagers can travel freely?

Yes.

Are they questioned while travelling?

No.

For villagers who do not have enough food, what do they do?

The villagers who have some money go to buy rice in Hpapun [Town].

Do the villagers have any way to earn an income?

No. The [only] way [to earn an income] is when cardamom trees produce their fruit.

So is it the time [of year] when the [trees] fruit?

Yes.

When the villagers are on their way to work are they questioned?

Questioned by the Tatmadaw or KNU?

Both the Tatmadaw and KNU.

Now they [Tatmadaw and KNU] do not question anything.

Do they [villagers] have to ask permission before they go somewhere?

Now they do not have to ask for permission but our *Kaw Thoo Lei* [KNU]³ leaders also gave us a warning. [They said], “*Think before you drink water,*” [meaning] think before you act. Before we do something we have to think [about whether it] is the right thing to do or not. Is it against our people or not? This is what our leaders [KNU] often warn us of.

Have [the] KNU or the Tatmadaw military ever come to your village?

KNU [have] come to our village, but not the Tatmadaw.

When the KNU soldiers came to your village, did the villagers allow them [to come]?

Yes.

You said now that the Tatmadaw have not come to your village?

³ The term *Kaw Thoo Lei* refers to Karen State as demarcated by the Karen National Union (KNU), but the exact meaning and etymology is disputed; see: Jonathan Falla. *True Love and Bartholomew: Rebels on the Burmese Border*, Cambridge University Press: 1991.

Yes.

For how many years have they not come to your village?

I guess they have not come for six or seven [years] to E--- and B--- villages.

So since the ceasefire⁴ they have never come?

No.

Do you live near Tatmadaw army camps?

No. If we go [to the camps] it would be near Hpapun [Town].

Have the Tatmadaw ever ordered [the] head villagers [to go to them or do something for them]?

No.

Is there any forced labour or arbitrary taxation happening in your village?

We [have] not seen the KNU [imposing] forced labour.

Have there been any armed groups [that have] come to threaten the villagers?

No.

Now do the villagers work freely?

Now they do. I kept in mind [have noticed] that since the ceasefire took place the situation has changed.

Can you mention what the changes are from before the ceasefire took place to after the ceasefire took place?

I think the times have not arrived yet [for changes to occur]. Since the ceasefire took place our leaders [KNU] always go [to meet the Burma/Myanmar government] but we do not know what they do there. [Whether] their plan will be implemented or not we do not know. They [KNU] go there often and then come back. It seems as though we have not yet seen the implementation [of the ceasefire]. [However], due to the ceasefire period the leaders [KNU] go there often.

So you heard that the leaders go there often but you have not seen any changes?

Yes.

Do you have a school in your village?

Yes, we do have a school.

⁴ On January 12th 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Negotiations for a longer-term peace plan are still under way. For updates on the peace process, see the KNU Stakeholder webpage on the Myanmar Peace Monitor website. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014.

How many standards⁵ are there in the school?

[Up to] ninth standard.

How many teachers are there in the school?

There are three teachers: two female teachers and one male teacher.

Is it a KNU school or a private school?

It is a limited [standards 1-9] KED [Karen Education Department]⁶ school. It is a government school.

Which group: KED/KNU government or Burma government?

KNU government.

Do the students have to pay school fees?

No.

How much do the teachers get paid?

From what I understand, KED supported them with 4,500 baht (US \$133.48)⁷ in previous years. In 2014 they [KED] paid them 7,500 baht (US \$222.47).

Do the students' parents have to support them with something?

Yes. Each students' parents give 2,000 kyat (US \$1.80)⁸ and four bowls (8 kg. / 17.6 lb.)⁹ of rice per year.

So they have to support them with food?

Yes.

Do they [villagers] find the teachers themselves?

The villagers found the teachers themselves. Also, our brother from the Christian [Education] Department sends two teachers each year.

⁵ A Standard refers to a grade in the Burmese education system. Primary school runs from Standard 1 to Standard 4, middle school is Standards 5-8 and high school is Standards 9-10.

⁶ The Karen National Union's Education Department. The main goals of the KED are to provide education, as well as to preserve Karen language and culture. During the civil war in Burma/Myanmar the KED became the main organisation providing educational services in the KNU controlled areas in southeast Burma/Myanmar. The KED also previously oversaw the educational system in the seven refugee camps along the Thai-Burma/Myanmar border, however in 2009 these activities were restructured under the Karen Refugee Committee – Education Entity (KRCEE). See "[Conflict Erupts over Govt teachers deployed to KNU areas](#)," Karen News, August 20th 2013 and the KRCEE website: '[About](#),' accessed July 9th 2015.

⁷ All baht to US \$ conversions in this report are based on the June 15th 2015 exchange rate of 33.7125 baht to US \$1.

⁸ All kyat to US \$ conversions in this report are based on the June 15th 2015 exchange rate of 1,112.48 kyat to US \$1.

⁹ A bowl is a unit of volume used to measure paddy, milled rice and seeds. One bowl is equivalent to 1.28 kg. or 2.88 lb. of paddy, and 2 kg. or 4.4 lb. of milled rice. A bowl is also equivalent to 2 mess tins, 8 milk tins, or 1/8 of a big tin.

So this school also belongs to a missionary?

Yes.

So they [missionaries] support two teachers and the villagers have to support one teacher?

No, the KED supports [all of] them.

Have the students had enough notebooks and other supplies each year [that the school has been open]?

Yes.

Does any other organisation come to support this school?

No.

Do they learn freely in their study?

Yes.

Do they teach Karen language?

Yes.

Do they have permission to teach it?

Yes.

How much is one *viss*¹⁰ of chicken in your village?

[It cost] 3,000 kyat (US \$2.70) in the past. In 2014, it was especially [expensive], increasing to 5,000 kyat (US \$4.49) for one *viss* of chicken.

How about one *viss* of pork?

3,000 kyat (US \$2.70).

How much is one big tin¹¹ of rice?

6,000 kyat (US \$5.39).

Since the ceasefire agreement, do forced labour and arbitrary taxation still exist in your village?

[Perpetrated by the] KNU or the Tatmadaw?

Both.

¹⁰ A *viss* is a unit of weight equivalent to 1.6 kg. or 3.52 lb.

¹¹ 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.

Forced labour occurs less now.

It [occurs] less now, so how did the villagers achieve this?

How did they do [this]? Because activities of the Tatmadaw are less than [they were] in the past. The KNU is also less active with regards to forced labour.

So if the KNU and the Tatmadaw are patrolling [the area], do they both ask for labourers [porters]?

Yes.

Do you think the ceasefire is trustworthy?

I will express my own point of view openly. Even though they said [there is a ceasefire] and signed [a] ceasefire agreement, I [will] never trust it. For example, fighting broke out in Kachin State;¹² they had already signed it [a ceasefire] but [still] fought with the Kachin. Secondly, they launched heavy weapons [artillery] at the Kachin Second Lieutenant training ground.¹³ Over 20 people died [in this attack]. Even when I die I will never trust the Tatmadaw. I believe that they are untrustworthy and not good people. This is the main point that I believe.

How do you feel about the ceasefire?

[I feel] as I have said above. A proverb from a radio station was said often: "*It was not a true national conference. It was a hoax national conference.*" I [agree] with this proverb.

In your village, are there any development projects that the [Burma/Myanmar] government has come to implement?

No. They want to do development projects but we [have] not given them permission.

They want to do [projects]?

Yes.

Villagers do not allow them?

Yes.

Why have they not been given permission?

We can see obviously [what the government is doing]. [It is the same as when] Jesus Christ [was sold by one of his servants] for 30 [pieces of silver] before being killed. It will be the same system with this [development project].

¹² For further details about the renewed fighting in Kachin State, see "[Hundreds flee new fighting in Myanmar's north](#)," *Al Jazeera*, January 2015.

¹³ The interviewee is likely referring to a high-profile incident from November 19th 2014 near Laiza in which 22 cadets who were training for combat at Jawng Rung base died and at least another 15 were injured due to artillery shelling by the Tatmadaw military base at Hkarabum. The killed cadets were from the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Arakan Army (AA), All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) and Chin National Front (CNF), all allies of the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO). See, "[22 Dead as Burma Army Fires on Kachin Military Academy, Rebels Say](#)," *The Irrawaddy*, November 2014; and "[Laiza shelling fatalities were from KIO allies, ABSDF, AA, CNF, TNLA](#)," *Kachin News*, November 2014.

They have not given permission because of that outcome?

Yes.

Since the ceasefire took place, have you heard about the Tatmadaw killing villagers?

When we listen to the radio it has been reported often. In January we heard that they had killed Kachin girls.¹⁴ We often heard about it. If we note it down we can collect a lot of information. I am telling you what I remember. We always heard on the radio that they raped women and oppress other ethnic groups.

How about in your area, did you hear about it [killing cases]?

We have not heard [anything about killings].

Have you heard about the Tatmadaw enlisting forced labour since the ceasefire took place?

We have heard about it. In the past they [Tatmadaw] always asked the villagers to do work for them.¹⁵ During the ceasefire period, forced labour has taken place less than in the past. [However], we are not sure if they are pretending [to reduce the number of forced labour incidents] themselves due to the ceasefire agreement or not. If we compare the ongoing ceasefire period and pre-ceasefire period the number of forced labour [cases] is less [now] than in the past.

After the ceasefire, did any aspects of your situation change?

There are no special changes. I saw that they are building a very nice bridge and I think it will cost a lot of money but we do not know the reason behind it [being built].

They [Burma/Myanmar government] constructed the roads and bridges, so you think they might have their own motives for constructing [these things]?

I see that the area that they constructed the bridge in is a [common] battle area in Karen State, especially in Hpapun [District]. In my opinion they constructed very good roads and bridges [so that] if the ceasefire is not stable between these two groups [Tatmadaw and KNU] they [Tatmadaw] will climb the mountainside with cars or train [trucks] to send food [rations to their bases]. If the KNU destroys their bridge they will play [take action] with the KNU separately from political [action]. They do it [construction] for political reasons, this is what I see.

Do you have any other opinions?

In my opinion, I think the Burma [government] is not honest [about] giving us independence. We have to fight for our independence.

¹⁴ The interviewee is likely referring to another high-profile incident that occurred in January 2015 in northern Shan State and involved the rape and murder of two ethnic Kachin school teachers. The murders are widely believed to have been perpetrated by Tatmadaw soldiers who had recently arrived in the area. For more information see, "[2 Kachin teachers found dead in Shan State](#)," The Irrawaddy, January 2015; and "[2 Kachin teachers brutally raped and killed by Burmese Army](#)," Burma Campaign UK, January 2015.

¹⁵ For more information on incidents of forced labour in Hpapun District prior to the 2012 preliminary ceasefire, see, "[Papun Interview: Saw T---, December 2011](#)," KHRG, July 2012; "[Incident Report: Papun District, June 2011](#)," KHRG, May 2012; and "[Papun Interview: Saw H---, March 2011](#)," KHRG, February 2012.

What do you think about the future situation and what is your hope?

I hope there will be no fighting, but what our enemy [Tatmadaw] has planned for us we have no idea; we have not seen their plan. I hope there will be peace and no fighting and the situation will get better.

Have you heard about any women being raped after the ceasefire took place?

In our areas we have not heard about that.

Can you tell me your experience?

In 1995, I got married to my wife in B--- village. At the time, the Tatmadaw army was based near F--- [mountain]. They [Tatmadaw] asked us to go there. At that time, no one could speak Burmese language except me. They were planning to move their camp so they asked us to transfer the tools for them [but we did not know that we would have to do this]. They said, *"Tomorrow, come a bit early and bring machetes and a saw with you."* They [Tatmadaw] said, *"We will clear our camp."* When we reached there [the camp] they said, *"Here is your bundle to transfer."* They did not tell us before we came. We thought, *"Should we go or not?"* We did not know. It was the very worst year. When we went to their camp we did not bring any clothes because we [thought we] would be returning after [work] in the evening. We had to carry their tools and everything [else] because they moved their camp to Hpapun [Town]. Even though we could not carry [it all], we had to. On our way back to our village we did not have enough rice to eat. It took two days to reach Hpapun [Town]. Our families did not know where we had gone. They stayed [behind] and worried. This was the first time. The second time, my brother [was] killed by the Tatmadaw. The people [villagers] asked me to find him. I also asked the Meh Klaw village tract [leader] to find him. At the time I lived in Hkaw Poo village tract. It was very difficult for us if we went to look for him, [because] the Tatmadaw may have planted landmines. My brother was already dead but we were not able to find his dead body. As I've faced it [this persecution] time and time [again] I felt as though I am not normal. The third time, I came back with the Tatmadaw to G--- [village]. The people [KNU] waited to shoot them [Tatmadaw] on the road to H--- [village]. Sometimes my wife tells me, *"You are a forgetful person."* This is my experience.

In your village, have any villagers' land been confiscated by the Tatmadaw?

Yes, this uncle [points at an individual present during the interview], [Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)]¹⁶ #340 confiscated his land.

What is his name?

Saw I---.

[LIB] #340?

Yes.

When did they confiscate his land?

A long time ago, when the Burmese head villager U Wun Thu Hta [leased] and farmed it. The Tatmadaw confiscated it when he [U Wun Thu Hta] did it [farmed the land].

¹⁶ Light Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprised of 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Primarily for offensive operations but sometimes used for garrison duties.

Did they inform the owner?

No.

Did they give compensation?

No.

How did the owner know his land was confiscated?

If you go to their [Tatmadaw] army base they [Tatmadaw] wrote on [a sign] saying that it is the battalion's land. He learned about it from many people.

Have they returned the land to the owners in the ceasefire period?

No. They did not confiscate only that land. There are many other peoples' lands in Hpapun [Town that were confiscated]. Saw J---'s land was also confiscated. Now it is Infantry Battalion (IB)¹⁷ #19's land. His land was inherited. It was passed down [to him] from his grandparents.

Do they [villagers] protect their land in some way?

The land owners want to get compensation and get back their land but we are villagers so we are not educated. We said that they confiscated our land, three or four acres of land, but it is very hard to get back our lands. In the lower part of Ler Per Daw [Town], a copper project took place and also [led to] confiscation of a lot of villagers' lands. They have not returned the land to the owners, therefore for us to regain our land will take a lot of time. Some people lost their land, 80 to 100 acres, but they [Tatmadaw] do not respect us or listen [to us] so we think that in Hpapun [District] area it will take a very long time for it [to be resolved].

Did the owner submit [a complaint] about it [land claim]?

Saw K--- from Hpapun [Town] told me to come and report the land that was confiscated by the Tatmadaw. Especially [with regard to] my father's land, my brother submitted it [the case] many times but we have not seen any action taken. The Tatmadaw have also not returned land to the owners and I never heard that they had returned land.

Did you go by yourself to submit this case?

My brother went to submit it by himself but the same person at the land department told my brother that they will return the land. We [have] not yet seen anything [change].

When did he submit it?

In 2014, but we did not note down the date.

He submitted it to which people?

I do not know his name.

They did not submit it to the KNU?

¹⁷ Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprised of 500 soldiers. However, most Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Primarily for garrison duty but sometimes used in offensive operations.

They submitted it, but we do not know what the KNU will do for us.

They submitted it?

Yes.

What do you hope?

With regards to the land, there is no hope for us to get back our land or get compensation.

What about other [issues]?

The ceasefire between the Myanmar government and KNU, I hope it will be true. We may have to face more problems than in the past if it is not true. This is what we are concerned [about].

What kind of [things] worry [you]?

In the past, we fled into the jungle and left our families in the villages. If they saw our wives and children they arrested them. This is our worry. If the ceasefire is not stable the situation will be the same as before. Forced labour, rape and killings are the main concerns for us.

Do you want to say anything that I have not [asked a] question [about]?

No.

If you do not have further questions, thank you.

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

- “Explicit threats and the indiscriminate firing of mortars and small arms by BGF soldiers in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District, June 2015,” (August 2015)
- “Violent abuse and killing committed by BGF soldiers in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District, March to May 2015,” (July 2015)
- ““With only our voices, what can we do?”: Land confiscation and local response in southeast Myanmar,” (June 2015)
- “Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, June to November 2014,” (June 2015)
- “Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho and Dwe Lo townships, November 2013 to January 2014,” (June 2015)

Mu Traw (Hpapun) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)