



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

June 7th, 2016 / KHRG #15-83-A2-I1

Hpa-an Interview: Naw A---, June 2015

This Interview with Naw A--- describes land confiscation, local drug supply and drug use, arbitrary taxation and demands in Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District. Naw A--- describes how her family's and other villagers' lands were confiscated in 1991 and 1992 by Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #338. Her family's land was confiscated despite the fact that they had official land documents issued by the Burma/Myanmar government. The villagers were told that they would receive compensation for the land that was confiscated but at the time of this Interview, Naw A--- had not heard of anyone who had received compensation. Naw A--- further describes drug use in Hlaingbwe Township and how the local community is trying to address it. Some local community leaders have formed a working group together with a senior monk and representatives from the Karen National Union (KNU) in order to put an end to drug use in the area. However, Naw A--- explains that there has been little progress on eliminating the use of drugs.

Interview | Naw A---, (female, 44), Hlaingbwe Town, Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District (June 2015)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member who has been trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Hpa-an District on June 27th 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 Hpa-an District, including two other interviews, 156 photographs and 24 video clips.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Single

Occupation: No occupation

Position: Villager

What is your name *sayama*?³

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.

³ Saya (male) or sayama (female) is a Burmese/Myanmar term used for any teacher, pastor, or any person to whom one wishes to show respect.

My name is Naw A---.

How old are you sayama?

44.

Are you married? No?

I am single.

Do you have a family?

I have a family. My father passed away. My mother is [works] in the farm. I have five siblings.

What is your occupation?

I used to be a school teacher but I quit and now I stay at home with my mother.

Why did you quit?

Because I did not want to work. I was not interested in it.

So you submitted a resignation letter and you quit?

Yes, I submitted a resignation letter and I quit.

So where do you live?

Hlaingbwe [Town], [censored for security] section, [censored for security] road.

Living with your mother, what do you do?

I just stay with my mother. I do nothing. [I am] dependent [on my mother].

Have you ever experienced problems, like for example human rights violations or other things?

I don't know [much about] human rights violations. But when I was young, [there was] an issue regarding farmland. At that time there was war and I saw that my father was suffering.

How did your father suffer?

Because the farmland was confiscated, my father got depressed and later he passed away from all the stress.

Was it your land that was confiscated?

Yes.

By whom?

By the military.

Which military?

[Light Infantry Battalion (LIB)] #338.⁴

When was that?

In 1991 and 1992.

How many acres of your land were confiscated?

Over 11 acres.

Why did they confiscate it?

They took it by force during the time of conflict. They said they would use it for military purposes and they confiscated it.

How did they confiscate it? Did they just come and confiscate it with an order letter or what?

I don't know about that. At that time I was a school-age child. I will tell you as I was told by the elders.

Yes.

What they told me was, the first time the military [LIB] #338 came to set up their base there they gathered the farmers, and they asked them [the farmers] to sign [a contract] to give them [LIB #338] their lands. They [the farmers] did not accept it and they went back [home]. My mother told him [my father] not to sign the document. But the second time [the soldiers from LIB #338 talked to the farmers], it included threats.

How did they threaten you?

They threatened [them] like, if they did not sign, they would include them in porter [service]. They also said, "*If you do not sign, we will not give you compensation*". They would pay an individual amount for each mango tree, marian [plum] tree, and jack fruit tree. They said they would pay compensation based on the amount of trees [on the land] and they asked [them] to sign under threat.

So after they confiscated it, did they pay compensation?

Since then, I have not heard of anyone who got compensation.

So, only your farmland was confiscated? [Or did the confiscation] include other lands as well?

At that place, it included farmland and housing land. There was a hut and we had planted many kinds of fruit trees.

Do people stay there now?

⁴ In addition to LIB #338, KHRG has also received information suggesting that LIB #339 and Infantry Battalion (IB) #28 confiscated villagers land in the area. A Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. LIBs are primarily used for offensive operations, but they are sometimes used for garrison duties.

My parents used to stay there from the beginning of farming in rainy season; they stayed in the farm until they were done ploughing [the fields]. We would go and get the fruit at the weekend when school was off. My five siblings lived at home and went to school.

What problems did you face after your land was confiscated?

We faced livelihood problems. I only have female siblings. As for males, there was only my father. In the past, if my father could not work on it [the farm] alone, he would hire people to work for him. Now, we have many siblings [relatives];⁵ four of my relatives from the village have come to stay [at my house] during [their] schooling. That also makes our livelihood situation more difficult.

So what did you do after your land was confiscated?

My father grew crops for two years [on the land, after it was confiscated]. They increased the [tax paid in] crops every year and [in the end] my father could not work with it anymore. Naw B-- went to Bangkok [for work]. At that time, I had not finished school yet. And she [Naw B---] supported [us with] money for [our] livelihood.

[Naw B--] is your mother?

My older sister.

What did you mean by *thi sa* [tax paid in crops instead of money]?

It means that they now own our land and they lease it back to us again. They take [crops] based on the [number of] acres that you work on. They call it farmland fee. I do not understand it very well, the elders understand it better. My father worked [on the land] for the first year but [after the harvest] the following year they [the Tatmadaw] said that it was uneconomical [not profitable enough]. We harvested and then we had to send rice to the military camp. There were no cars at that time, and we had to hire ox carts as we did not have one. We had to send the rice to them ourselves, and we had to put it into their barn ourselves. The following year, they asked for more [rice as tax]. They said it was uneconomical [not profitable enough] for them. We farmers did everything for them and they [the Tatmadaw] still said that it was uneconomical [not profitable enough] for them so after that no farmers worked on it [the land].

How much [rice] did you have to pay for each acre of land [that farmers worked on]?

[Inaudible]

Oh, you do not know. Why did they say it was uneconomical [not profitable enough]?

They wanted more. If farmers worked more they would get more [rice]. That is why they said it was uneconomical [not profitable enough]. The farmers had to do all the work, and they even had to put it [the rice] into their barn and the villagers had to do all their labour. It was still uneconomical [not profitable enough] for them. It was not their farmland. It belonged to the villagers. They confiscated it and they leased the land back to the farmers and the farmers worked on the land and it was still uneconomical [not profitable enough] for them, so the farmers could no longer work on the farms. They leased our [own] land to us. It was like that!

⁵ ‘Siblings’ here is used in a broader sense than brothers and sisters; the interviewee calls some of her relatives siblings as well.

So your father did not pay *thi sa* [tax paid in crops instead of money] and stayed home?

He stayed at home. After that, my father's health situation got worse.

Why?

This farm was passed down by his grandparents and it made him depressed [that it was confiscated].

Do you have a land title document for this land?

We used to have one, but it has been a long time and we do not keep it with us [anymore]. It has been a very long time and we thought that our land would not be returned. We did keep it with us for a long time, but after two years [my mother] threw it away [lost it]. My mother told me that. That is why...

So it does not have a land title document anymore?

No.

So it used to have a land title document?

Yes.

Who issued that land title document?

It was from the township land [department].

From the KNU [Karen National Union] government?

From the [Burma/Myanmar] government.

So the land title document is from the [Burma/Myanmar] government?

Yes.

Did only your land get confiscated? Or other villagers' land as well?

Other villagers' land as well, from C--- [village], D--- [village], and E--- [village]. From this side [around here], it included F--- village and now it [F--- village] has become a new village. They [the Burma/Myanmar government] divided the land into new plots.

How did it become a new village?

They [the Burma/Myanmar government] built a small village. They confiscated the land near [the army camp of LIB] #339. There used to be a village there. In F--- [village], there used to be a village as well. The military [Tatmadaw] confiscated the land in that village to build their military camp. Till now, we do not know how big the area of their military land is. They say that the area is for military use. If [villagers] ask them how much land [they occupy], they never answer us. It is like they have confiscated more land than they really need. So those villagers from F--- village, they gave them a plot of land.

Who gave the land?

The [Burma/Myanmar] government.

In the new village, who did the land belong to [originally]?

At that time, there were owners [of that land].

The land had owners but the government came and gave it [to other villagers]?

I am not sure from whom the government bought a bit of land for the new village. The land they gave [to the villagers from F--- village] also had owners.

So the new village is not a farm, it is a village?

It was a farm before. Now, [the villagers] have no land to stay on [after the Tatmadaw confiscated their land] and gave [them] land that belonged to other villagers.

So E--- is a village?

Yes, it is. There is a pagoda near G--- bridge. Around the area near that pagoda, there used to be a big village.

Is there government military [Tatmadaw] there now?

No, there is no government military [Tatmadaw]. There are only bushes. They took a small place where they [built their] base and they keep the [rest of the] land as military land.

Including lands and farmlands, how many acres would it be, all the lands that were confiscated by the military?

You mean all [the land] that they did not measure?

Yes. Guess, approximately.

I guess there might be over 500 acres of land. Now, all the land that has been measured so far is over 300 acres. They still have not measured the land where the military bases for [LIB] #338 and [LIB] #339 are.

Who measured the land?

It was the KNU.

When did they measure it?

August 2014.

Did the KNU come and measure the land themselves or did they come at the villagers' request?

At the villagers' invitation, like a request.

Were there any problems between the KNU and the Tatmadaw military when they conducted the land survey?

Nothing happened.

Was there anything that you reported about the land confiscation by the Tatmadaw to someone superior?

Yes, we reported it to the authorities, for example the parliament and the president [of Burma/Myanmar].

When you reported it to the president [of Burma/Myanmar] what did the president say?

[He] said nothing, but we reported it to the Farmland Investigation Commission⁶ and we reported it to that group from Daw Nan Say Awa's village. And they came along with [their representative] from the parliament and checked the field in the area where [LIB] #338 [is based]. At that time, they had not planted anything on our land and farm. But last year, when the KNU came and measured the land, we saw that they were growing plants; we saw the buildings [they had built] and we saw the wells that they had dug.

In what year did the Farmland Investigation Commission come? When did they inspect your land?

I did not note the date exactly.

Only the year [what year]?

In 2013.

So when you checked [the land] in 2013, there was nothing?

No, nothing.

In 2014, after the KNU had measured the land ...?

There were plants that they were growing and there were wells.

So that means there used be no wells?

No [correct].

So it means they covered up the truth [did it without informing you]?

Yes, they did. In front of H--- monastery, on the way to I--- [village], there used to be a place like a landing pad [for helicopters]. When we measured the land, they [the Tatmadaw] had divided the land into plots. It used to be unused land and then they formed the land into plots with lines and planned for paddy fields. That is what happened in addition [to the land confiscation]. In [the camp of LIB] #339, they had planted rubber trees. The rubber trees that they had planted were not small plants; they were as tall as a man.

Oh, so they did not start planting small trees? They started with trees that were as tall as a man.

Yes.

⁶ The Farmland Investigation Commission is a parliamentary commission set up in 2012 to investigate farmland ownership disputes. It reports to the *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* (the Assembly of the Union), the bicameral national legislature of Burma/Myanmar.

What did you hear back from the Farmland Investigation Commission?

We have not heard anything. What they did is they came and inspected [the land] and reported it back [to the parliament] but they [the Farmland Investigation Commission] did not reply in any way. I often go to Daw Nan Say [Awa]'s village and ask [them] but they have not heard anything back [from parliament]. That group told us that we should organise farmers [whose lands have been confiscated] and go to Nay Pyi Taw and meet with the parliament's chairperson and ask him why he has not returned the land. He has returned lands in other areas. But to ask him about it, we dare not do that, and we couldn't go.

Who is the person that you called Daw Nan Say Awa?

She is the national parliament representative for the Plone-Sgaw [Democratic Party (PSDP)]⁷ from Hpa-an. She is called Daw Nan Say Awa.⁸

So you haven't heard anything back yet?

No, not yet.

Were there any other ways in which you requested to have [your land] returned?

No other way. We just reported it to the parliament by submitting letters. We reported it to the relevant departments in Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District, Mawlamyine Division [District] and [they passed it] on to the parliament. We asked the relevant departments but they said they had not heard anything from their superiors, and we asked the land registration [office], and also the farmland administration department but they did not reply [either]. We also asked the general administration [officer] but he did not reply. As for us, we kept submitting [letters] but we heard nothing back. Last year, before the KNU confiscated land, they requested to meet with us [for a consultation].⁹ The township general administrator and land administrator [from the Burma/Myanmar government side] requested us to meet with them. And they said that they had received the letter and that they were not going to return the lands that were confiscated by the Tatmadaw. They said that they had been ordered to say this by their [Tatmadaw] superiors. They said that in front of us farmers. It was at the general administrator's office.

Which general administration office?

At the Karen Township¹⁰ General Administration Department (GAD) office. There, they told us that they were not going to return the land to us. [They said:] "*do not pursue [this case] with an agent, you will get tired [if you do].*" They said: "*only your time and money will be gone [if you pursue this case].*" We could not tolerate what they said and we asked for help from T--- Sayadaw¹¹, and T--- Sayadaw directed us to reach out to the KNU and T--- Sayadaw was

⁷ The Plone-Sgaw Democratic Party (PSDP) is a political party based in Kayin State. The party won several seats in the 2010 election but was not successful in the 2015 election. They are now reportedly in talks with four other Karen parties to unite under one banner. See e.g. [Five Karen Political Parties to Unite Into One](#), Karen News (January 29, 2016)

⁸ Daw Nan Say Awa is a former member of parliament from Hpa-an for the Plone-Sgaw Democratic Party (PSDP).

⁹ It is not clear why the interviewee brings the KNU into the discussion here. One reason might be to give an example from her own experience of how the KNU had consulted with local communities when they confiscated land in the past, as opposed to when the Tatmadaw confiscated land without any form of consultation.

¹⁰ It is not clear what township the interviewee is referring to here. There is no township called Karen Township.

¹¹ Sayadaw is a Burmese/Myanmar term used for the senior monk or abbot of a monastery.

suggesting that we still have the backing of our Karen people. That is why we approached the KNU with the help of T--- Sayadaw.

So the letter has already been sent [to the General Administration Department]?

Yes. They have it along with detailed information and dates but they are not going to return the land. It is like that.

So what is your opinion about this case?

These farmlands were passed down by our grandparents so we want them back, they [the Tatmadaw] do not use the land [for military purposes], and the farmers want their lands that were passed down by their grandparents back. You can use the land to work for your livelihood and you can also pass on the farmland to the next generation like your niece or nephew. That is why we want our lands back. They do not use the land, they just hold onto it. They confiscated more land than they needed. If they confiscate land for their military camps, [they should] just take the land [they need] for the military camp. Now, they confiscate more than they really need, including the farmlands, so we want them back. Almost all farmers want their lands back as these lands were passed down by their grandparents.

So all this is about the land issue. Do you have anything else to say that I did not cover in my questions? Have you anything to add? Is there any question that I missed related to this case? Like a question you want to answer but I have not asked you yet. Anything to add?

No, you have covered it all.

Are there any other kinds of human [rights] violations here by the military? For example, forced labour, violent abuse etc.?

We do not have those issues here.

How about rape cases?

No, not from the military around here.

Anything else to add?

[Inaudible]

So thanks.

Thanks for asking.

Ok.

Now, there is grumbling in our area and people are using medicines [yaba¹² and other drugs], but the [armed] groups have said that they are going to organise groups to eliminate those things. But it hasn't happened [yet] and now the drug use is increasing.

¹² *Yaba*, which means 'crazy medicine' in Thai, is a tablet form of methamphetamine. First developed in East Asia during the Second World War to enhance soldiers' performance, methamphetamine has become increasingly popular

Which group was that?

They have now organised a group, including *Sayadaw* [a senior monk] and the KNU [Karen National Union]. They are going to work together to eliminate the use [of drugs]. [The problem] has not gone away, it has increased. It is increasing and most people who do that [sell *yaba* and other drugs] are people who have money. The problem can be stopped by giving them [the people trying to put an end to drug use] money.

OK.

If they [the local authorities] want to, they can stop it and the problem would be gone. Most of the people who suffer are civilians.

Right.

What do you want to ask? What you want to know?

Oh, that is a serious problem.

Yes, it is. For example in Hlaingbwe, children who are in Standard¹³ 6 or 7 know how to smoke and use drugs.

Teachers do not know about it?

They know but children nowadays, they [the teachers] cannot tell [stop] them. They do not even listen to their parents.

So it is easy to find [*yaba*]? What is the problem for the teachers [when children use *yaba*]?

The problem is that children disobey them. Whatever you say, they know where to get them [*yaba*]. In the past, there used to be a game shop beside my house. The children came there to play, and sometimes two boys would go to the toilet at the same time. I was their neighbour and I suspected them, so I told the shop owner that I suspected those two children who had just gone to the toilet. And she replied: "*Don't you know? They are using yaba*". I did not know until she told me. Here, it is easy [to buy and use drugs].

Where do they get it from? From the town?

Could be in town.

It is so difficult. It has increased a lot in Karen State.

Yes.

So mostly, in Hpa-an and Dooplaya districts?

in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and in Burma/Myanmar where it is typically manufactured. See, "[Yaba, the 'crazy medicine' of East Asia](#)," UNODC, May 2008 and "[Woman raped and killed in Pa'an District, October 2012](#)," KHRG, December 2012, and "[Chapter: Drug production, use and the social impacts in Southeast Myanmar since the January 2012 ceasefire](#)," KHRG, June 2014.

¹³ A standard refers to a school year in the education system of Burma/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.

In the village of Daw Nan Say Awa,¹⁴ who is a Plone-Sgaw [Democratic Party (PSDP)] national parliament member, the chairperson of Plone-Sgaw party, U Saw Thein Aung, submitted a proposal to the parliament to stop the drug problem. Daw Nan Say Awa supported that proposal. They requested a change, and the leaders here have already taken serious actions against it. Had they not, we would have had an [even more] serious problem. [The place where they produce *yaba*] is near a village close to *Zwe Ka Bin* [mountain]. If you go back and they are informed that I reported to you about this, they will come and cut my head off. That's what I will have to face. I am just expressing my feelings [about drugs]. These children could be the leaders of the country sometime in the future. Now they know how to use drugs and they smoke a lot.

What is the opinion of the teachers? Where does it come from?

There was a time when I went to a training and we were divided into groups. The trainers distributed papers [about drugs] and they asked: "*Where does it come from?*" And some answered that it comes from the DKBA [Democratic Karen Benevolent Army].¹⁵ As they came back, some said it came from other districts, some said it was from China, some said it was from Thailand, some said it was from the border, and some said that it was from the KNU, and an officer from the KNU answered: "*It is impossible. If you are sure that it comes from us, check. And if you want to know where it is coming from, check the cars that go to Shan State.*" They said that the machine [that produces drugs] is small. You can handle it with one or two people. I just heard that. I have never seen it. That is what they said [in the workshop]. They make money from a small machine.

So sayama where you think it comes from? In your opinion.

I don't know.

For example, the teachers, nurses or doctors, are they receiving enough salary?

Now, their [monthly] salary has increased. It is over 100,000 [kyats]¹⁶ (US \$85.79); it is 150,000 (US \$128.70) or 160,000 (US \$137.28) depending on the position.

In other townships, we have heard that the teachers use their phones when they teach and it affects the learning of the children. Are there things like that here?

¹⁴ Daw Nan Say Awa is a former member of parliament from Hpa-an for the Plone-Sgaw Democratic Party (PSDP). The party won several seats in the 2010 election but was not successful in the 2015 election. They are now reportedly in talks with four other Karen parties to unite under one banner. See e.g. [Five Karen Political Parties to Unite into One](#), Karen News (January 29, 2016).

¹⁵ The Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), sometimes referred to as the Klo Htoo Baw Battalion or DKBA-5, formerly the Democratic Kayin Buddhist Army, was formed in December 1994 and was originally a breakaway group from the KNU/KNLA. They were known to cooperate with the Tatmadaw on occasion. The DKBA now refers to a splinter group from those DKBA forces that were absorbed into Tatmadaw Border Guard Forces in 2010, also remaining independent of the KNLA. The DKBA leader for many years was Saw Lah Pwe, who led the group after it rejected government plans to integrate it into Border Guard Forces in 2010. The current DKBA signed a preliminary ceasefire with the Burma/Myanmar Government on November 3rd 2011. As of April 2012, the DKBA changed its name from "Buddhist" to "Benevolent" to reflect its secularity. The DKBA signed the Nationwide Ceasefire (NCA) on October 15th 2015 with the Burma/Myanmar government and its military. The group is based in Son Si Myaing area, Myawaddy Town, Kawkareik Township, Doolaya District.

¹⁶ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the May 10th 2016 official market rate of 1,165.68 kyats to the US \$1.

[You mean] Like using a laptop or mobile phone, using Facebook, and that they even use it during teaching, that they do not care about teaching? That might happen in other townships. I have not heard of anything like that in Hlaingbwe Township. In Hlaingbwe Township, there is mostly [private] tutoring.

Thank you *sayama*.

Oh, you have nothing else to ask? There is one thing [I would like to tell you] about palm trees. They [the villagers] stopped paying tax last year because the tax on palm trees was increased.

Oh, are there palm trees there? Oh, you have to pay tax in order to climb the palm trees [commercially produce wine]?

The military [Tatmadaw] request that we pay tax on a yearly basis. There is an uncle, ask him.



These photos were taken in Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District on June 28th 2015. They show villagers' lands that were confiscated by Tatmadaw LIB #338 in 1991 and 1992. According to information obtained by KHRG, Tatmadaw LIB #339, and IB #28 were also implicated in land confiscation in the area. [Photo: KHRG]

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

- *The 2015 Elections and Beyond: Perspectives from villagers in rural southeast Burma/Myanmar*, (February 2016)
- "Hpa-an Short Update: Nabu Township, April to March 2015," (October 2015)
- "Fighting between Tatmadaw and DKBA soldiers along the Asian Highway displaces villagers in Dooplaya District, July 2015," (September 2015)
- "Hpa-an Incident Report: Violent abuse and killing committed by BGF soldiers in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town, Hlaingbwe Township, April 2015," (August 2015)
- "Hpa-an Incident Report: Explicit and violent threats in Myaing Gyi Ngu Town, Hlaingbwe Township, April 2015," (August 2015)

Hpa-an District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)