



Interview

September 20, 2017 / KHRG # 16-110-A1-I1

Nyaunglebin Interview: Naw A---, November 2016

This Interview with Naw A--- describes events occurring in Hsaw Htee (Shwegyin) Township, Nyaunglebin District, including goldstone mining.

- *According to Naw A---, the Karen National Union permitted business men to conduct goldstone mining in September 2016 on Hsaw O'o Law Klo River in Shwegyin Township.*
- *Due to the goldstone mining project, the river has been polluted. As a result, local villagers have been exposed to hazardous chemicals and the risk of sickness and disease.*

Interview | Naw A---, (female, 27), Shwegyin Township, Nyaunglebin District (November 2016)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Nyaunglebin District on November 10th 2016 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 Nyaunglebin District, including five other interviews, six incident reports and 106 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Single

Occupation: -

Position: [position censored for security] of Karen Women Organisation [KWO] in Hsaw Htee [Shwegyin] Township

What is your name?

My name is Naw A---.

How old are you?

I am 27 years old.

¹ KHRG trains community members in southeastern 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 southeastern 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.

Where do you live?

I live in Hsaw Htee [Shwegyin] Township.

What is your ethnicity?

I am Karen.

What is your religion?

I am a Christian.

Are you married?

No. I am single.

What is your position?

I am a [position censored for security] of KWO in Hsaw Htee [Shwegyin] Township.

Tell me about the current situation about education in your area.

We have now our [Karen] high schools in the area and our school teachers in our area just teach the children by using the Karen Education Department [KED]³ curriculum and instructions.

Can every child in your area study at the school?

Most of the children in our area can study at the school.

What about the healthcare situation in your area?

What do you mean by healthcare? What kind of healthcare?

I mean do people get medical treatment if they are sick? For example, do people have healthcare services in your area?

Regarding healthcare services, people in my area can receive medical treatment as well but sometimes there are not enough different types of medicine. If people get really sick, there is not enough medicine such as saline bottles [for intra-venous drips]. It causes a difficulty for villagers to get saline bottles because they have to buy them.

Are there any hospitals in your area?

Yes. We have a hospital.

Who built the hospital in your area? Karen Nation Union [KNU] or another organisation?

KNU built the hospital.

What do villagers mostly work on?

There are some villagers from the Irrawaddy Delta and some villagers from the mountains [who now live] in our area. Villagers from the mountains mostly work on farms and hill farms. Villagers from the Irrawaddy Delta work on farms and hill farms and some villagers work as daily labourers in order to support their livelihood.

Can villagers work on their farms freely? Regarding their work, have they had to stop working due to fighting [between armed groups]? Does the military [Tatmadaw] disturb villagers when they work on farms? For example, when Burmese soldiers [Tatmadaw] come to villagers, do they give trouble to villagers?

³ 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.

Burmese soldiers [Tatmadaw] do not come to our area.

What is the structure of development projects regarding economic [activities] in your area? Are there any development projects in your area?

There are many economic [development] projects in our area. Especially gold mining.

Regarding gold mining, are there any land confiscation issues in your area?

I do not know [enough] to say whether villagers' lands are confiscated or not. Before I came back [from a refugee camp in Thailand], villagers' lands were confiscated in the past. In Htee Ban village tract, their lands were confiscated due to gold mining. I heard that [the gold miners] told villagers that they would give one motorbike and they would build a house [for each family whose lands were taken]. However, villagers have not been given anything until now. The person who told villagers that has not done anything for the villagers yet.

For people who conduct gold mining in that area, are villagers included or is it just business people from other places?

I cannot say about that. Some local villagers in that area have Burmese friends [business people] from other places and they call their Burmese friends to come to the village because it is easy to travel as the road is good. Then, their Burmese friends come to live in the area in order to seek business opportunities.

So the gold mining is conducted in the KNU controlled area?

Yes.

So the KNU gives them [business people] permission to conduct the gold mining?

Yes.

Regarding conducting gold mining, does it cause conflict in the village area? Does it cause trouble to villagers when they work or travel?

Yes. It causes trouble to the villagers. Now [business men] come to conduct goldstone mining⁴ in our township and also they [business men] conduct it in the area of the headquarters. This is not safe for villagers. In addition, they do not respect villagers. When we live in our area, people respect us. When some other people come to our area, they do not respect us. I have seen things like that.

What is the name of the place where they conduct the gold mining?

The place is called Hsaw O'o Law Klo [River] in Hsaw Htee Township⁵. This is the name of the river. In the past, business men were already conducting the gold mining on this river. Then, the goldstone mining was conducted in the same place after the gold mining had been conducted.

When was it conducted?

Do you mean goldstone mining?

Yes.

Business men started conducting goldstone mining in September 2016. I heard that they started to discuss about goldstone mining project on the 8th [September].

⁴ The interviewee switches between 'goldstone' and 'gold' mining, both of which may be conducted in this area. Goldstone mining is locally used to refer to the separation of gold from stone using a grinding machine; gold mining is locally used to refer to the separation of gold from sand using water. Both processes involve the heavy use of chemicals to refine the separation of gold from other materials.

⁵ KHRG has previously reported on the issues surrounding gold mining in Hsaw Htee [Shwegyin] Township. See, "[Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Kyauk Kyi Township, February to April 2013](#)," December 2013, and "[Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Moo, Ler Doh and Hsaw Htee townships, January to June 2012](#)," October 2012.

As you told me before, it is not safe for villagers [when the goldstone mining is conducted] so do the local authorities manage this issue, for villagers' safety?

Local authorities do not manage [arrange] anything to protect villagers.

How is goldstone made? I mean, for example, with gold, people dig the ground and they pour water on the gold and they make gold. What about goldstone?

The goldstone is hit and broken it into many pieces. Then, it is put through a grinding machine and then it needs to be heated again. After that, the gold appears from the stone.

When the goldstone is heated, do [people] use chemicals and put it in the fire?

Yes. They use a lot of chemicals such as *Pauk Tay* and *Indrian*⁶ to break down the goldstone when they heat it.

When a lot of chemicals are used, it can cause trouble [harm] to the villagers. So are there any plans to protect the villagers?

No. There is no plan to protect villagers. [Business men] said that they are allowed to use only 20 bags of chemicals in order to test the goldstone. There was a discussion before they could test the goldstone. They were not allowed to heat the goldstone but they were allowed to heat it in the Htee Wah Bah Khaw area. I do not know where it is. However, one of our leaders allowed [business men] to use only 20 bags of chemicals in order to cook the goldstone. We do not know how many bags of chemicals they actually used but our leader said that they are allowed to use 20 bags of chemicals only.

Regarding using chemicals to heat the goldstone, do you think it can cause harm to villagers' health?

When we read about it from a book, [it said] first of all, the poison in the chemicals will spread into the air and then people will breathe it in and it will become a disease. That is one thing. Another thing is, if we use the water [that has chemicals in from the goldstone mining process], we will get skin cancer. According to one book, if animals consume that chemical water, animals can die. If we eat those animals, we can also die.

Regarding using chemicals to heat the goldstone, does it cause contamination to the water that villagers use? Do local people have to use the water from the source of the stream [instead]?

When they heat the goldstone, there are villagers from B--- village who have to use the water.

As you said, there are villagers who have to use the water downstream when [the gold stone workers] heat the goldstone beside the stream?

Yes. There are villagers who have to use water downstream. This stream flows into the sea.

By using chemicals, it can cause problems to many people who live downstream. So how many households or people do you think can be affected by the chemicals in the water? Can you estimate?

There are more than 30 households downstream [who might be directly affected]. However, from the chemical poison that spreads in the air, it will cause problems for all the people in this township.

How many villages are there around the place where the goldstone process is conducted?

There are three or four villages around the place where they conduct the goldstone process. So there are more than 600 people from four villages; there are more than 100 households from these four villages.

⁶ These chemicals have no direct translation in English. They most likely refer to cyanide and mercury. Both chemicals are extremely toxic to human health and the environment.

What are the names of those villages?

The names of those villages are C--- village, D--- village, E--- village and B--- village.

So there are more than 100 households in those villages. Right?

Yes.

What about the number of people?

There are more than 600 people including children.

As you said before, business men started conducting the goldstone process on September 8th, 2016. Did they consult with local villagers before they implemented it?

No. They did not consult with villagers but our [KNU] leader told them that they had to consult with villagers before they started processing the goldstone. If our villagers agreed with their project, we would be able to allow them to do it. Our [KNU] leader explained this to them. However, another [KNU] leader said that they did not need to consult with villagers. [KNU said] if we [KNU] make a decision, villagers have to follow [accept] the decision made. There are many [KNU] leaders who agreed with this. That is why the [local] leader who supports villagers [by trying to disagree with the gold mining] could not make the decision.

Who are the business men? Where are they from? Do they work for a company? If so, what company? How many companies are there?

I do not know about that. It is not like they are a company. How do I explain this? Eight businessmen work together to conduct the goldstone process.

Do you know the names of those eight businessmen?

I do not know all of their names, I only know one or two of the businessmen's names. They are Soe Min and Kyaw Min Naing. For the rest of the businessmen, I do not understand [their relationships] at all, it is something like Soe Min's brother-in-law and his parents-in-law. It is confusing. I do not know all of them.

Are they working [collaborating] with any organisations?

They work together with the Township's military [KNLA] organisation. To be clear, the township permanent committee need to know about it. [Now] The township permanent committee do not know all about it. Also, the administration's [KNU] organisation does not have any information about it.

Regarding the goldstone project, do you think it can benefit villagers or not?

In my opinion, it cannot benefit the local community. In addition, it is not secure or safe for the community. There is no one who protects the community. In fact, soldiers have to protect the community but they do not. Instead, they just give protection to the businessmen. The businessmen asked soldiers to take responsibility in providing for their security. Because of this, no one can disrupt their business.

Did the KNU/KNLA provide their soldiers to take responsibility for the businessmen's security?

Yes.

So there is no protection for villagers but only for those eight business men. Right?

Yes. These eight businessmen asked [Karen National Liberation Army] soldiers to take responsibility for their safety and security. Furthermore, they put soldiers around the place where they conduct the goldstone mining process because businessmen do not want anyone else to do goldmining in their area.

How many acres of lands are there around the area that they conduct goldstone mining on?

I heard that they have taken seven or ten acres of land to conduct their goldstone mining. Oh no, they only took seven acres of land.

Regarding goldstone mining, do villagers stand up and take a stance against it in order to protect their community?

What do you mean by that?

I mean what do villagers do against the project?

We have responsible people [local leaders] in the community. They wrote a letter to the Township leader but there was no response from the Township leader. I heard that local villagers also reported it [goldstone mining] to the District leader but there was no reply so they [villagers] thought that [it was because] the information they wrote in the letter was not systematic or formal. Local villagers have already written this [complaint] letter [to the District leader]. KWO also tries to be active to protect the rights of the community. KWO also reported to the Township leader that the local villagers do not agree with the goldstone mining project.

OK. As you said, how does KWO try to be active? How does KWO try to protect the community?

At first, we KWO had a meeting with village authorities, the village tract leader, the ten households' leader and some local villagers. In the meeting, KWO explained that there is no protection for them as well [from the pollution]. At that time, we heard that the goldstone process can cause harm to villagers if they [business men] heat the goldstone. KWO explained to them [village authorities] about it and they told everyone that we have to stop it together. KWO told them that KWO had to work together with villagers because nowadays their [KWO] voice cannot be heard but the villagers' voices can be. Therefore, KWO had to go to explain villagers about it. Also, KWO had to ask permission from village authorities. Then, KWO had to go to educate villagers house by house regarding [the risks of] the goldstone mining project. For villagers who do not agree with the project, we had to get signatures from them and [explain] why they do not accept the project. KWO tries to do things like that.

Then, KWO submitted a letter to the Township leader?

Yes.

Did they [KWO] get any reply from the Township leader?

They received a reply but [then] villagers and KWO were called to attend a meeting. They [Township leader and authorities] said that there is one barrier for them so they called a meeting with villagers and KWO because the letter that we sent had caused a problem for them. That is why we were asked to attend the meeting.

In the meeting, did they explain to villagers and other organisations about the goldstone mining project?

No. They [Township leader and authorities] did not plan to tell villagers about how the project would be conducted. They did not explain how the project is conducted in front of villagers. That is why KWO reported in the meeting that they [Township leader and authorities] should tell us about the process of the project. However, they did not tell us anything about the process of the project.

So we cannot know whether it can benefit the community or not. Right?

Yes. We cannot know. Honestly, it will benefit only one or two people but it will not benefit the community.

Regarding the goldstone project, what is the title name that they have given it? I mean, what is the purpose of this project [e.g. community development, military development]?

Because of this purpose, they will work in one way and not another [according to the regulations]. How do local leaders plan to do the project?

The title [purpose] that they give is for Township military development.

Regarding their title and their plan [purpose] for Township military development, do local authorities understand about it? Did they write [their plan] down in a book systematically? Or how did they plan it?

I do not think local authorities understand all about it, whether it is written or not.

In which village tract is the goldstone project conducted?

The goldstone project is conducted in Hsaw Ther Khee village tract.

Is anyone from the four villages that you mentioned in Hsaw Ther Khee village tract involved with the goldstone mining project?

No. Nobody is involved with it. How can any villager enter that area and be involved with the project? Because of the security plan that they set up, no one can enter that area and conduct the goldstone mining. Therefore, nobody [villagers] goes to disturb them [people who conduct goldstone mining].

Does anyone from KWO or any villagers enter the area where the goldstone mining is conducted? Has anyone interviewed the people who conduct the goldstone mining?

No. Villagers went to interview [people] there but KWO also went there to [try to] interview. We know that they [workers] dig the ground with a backhoe and then they grind the goldstone with a machine. They divide into two working groups, to break the goldstone into pieces. The first working group has to break goldstone without gloves and the second working group has to break goldstone wearing gloves. The second working group with gloves receives a higher salary than first group. Each worker from the second working group gets 10,000 kyat [US\$7.36]⁷ per day but each worker from the first group only gets 8,000 kyat [US\$5.88] per day.

How many backhoes and machines do they use?

When we went to see their workplace, they had one backhoe and one goldstone machine.

So you did not go to see their workplace one month ago?

No.

Is anyone allowed to go and enter their workplace in order to study [observe] it?

When they started to test the goldstone mining, nobody was allowed to go and study it. They have tested the [area for] goldstone mining for over one month. Now people try to stop it but it is uncertain [if they have been successful]. However, they just continue to conduct it and they do not stop it [because] we heard that they heat the goldstone. So we went to ask [KNLA] soldiers at their workplace about whether they [businessmen] are heating it or not. [KNLA] soldiers said that they do not heat the goldstone here but they heat it in Htee Wah Bah Khaw area. Then, we went to Htee Wah Bah Khaw area and we saw one building. We asked workers why they constructed this building. They told us that they used this wooden building as an office [as part of the goldstone mining operation]. However, we do not know where they got permission to construct this office. Also, they told us that this building is an office for their leaders from the town. If they come to this area, this office is where they can stay. We asked them [workers] again whether they heat goldstone there or not. They replied that they heat it there and they showed us a place where they heat goldstone. 20 bags of the goldstone have to be heated there [during the testing]. We asked them when they will leave. They said that they will leave when the goldstone has gone here.

⁷ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the August 23, 2017 official market rate of 1359 kyat to US \$1.

Did you interview the businessmen or their workers?

No. We just interviewed the workers. When we went there, we did not see [any] businessmen.

Did local villagers and KWO meet with the business men?

No. Local villagers and KWO have never met with the business men. For us, we want to have a meeting with the businessmen but there is no arrangement to meet with them.

What do you think of the goldstone project? How do you think it should be carried out?

Personally, I think this goldstone project should be stopped, we do not want it to continue anymore because this project is conducted in our Township. There is no protection for our community. A lot of people travel to our Township and some do not respect our community. Our community's security is not safe. Therefore, I want it [the project] to be stopped. However, one of our leaders told us that it is a good opportunity and we have to use this opportunity wisely, but I do not know whether this opportunity is good or not.

Regarding the goldstone project, there has been no certain or clear explanation given to villagers. Right?

Yes. Our villagers do not know anything about how the goldstone project is working.

Where did businessmen get permission from to conduct the goldstone mining? From the KNU Township leader or somewhere else?

How do I explain? They got permission from the military side [KNLA] because the Township administration department did not want to agree with this project.

So you mean they [businessmen] got permission [instead] from the Lead and Iron [Mining] Department [of the KNU]. Right?

No. No. Villagers saw that [goldstone area] and they told one of the Karen military leaders about it. I do not want to mention that leader's name. Then, that leader called the Burmese businessmen to test the area for whether goldstone is present or not. They found out that the goldstone is in the area. Then, that [Karen military] leader allowed the business men to conduct the goldstone mining.

Who are the villagers who saw the goldstone area? Where are they from? Are they from that area?

Yes. They are from that area [around where the goldstone mining is conducted].

Now, do those villagers benefit from that project?

No. They do not get [enough] benefit because they only get 30 percent [paid back to the village as profit] out of 100 percent [of the total profit made from the goldstone project]. It is not fair for them. Now the Township permanent committee have made a decision that those villagers can get 40 percent of [the profit] benefit. It is better if they can get 40 percent. Business men said that villagers must get 30 percent and they get 70 percent [of the total profit made from the goldstone project].

Oh you mean business men have to get 70 percent of benefits and villagers should get 30 percent, according to the business men. Right?

Yes but villagers have to dig the ground by themselves. I mean, if villagers want to do goldstone mining.

Oh you mean villagers who saw the goldstone in that area cannot conduct the goldstone mining?

Villagers who saw that goldstone area requested funding in order to conduct the goldstone mining but nobody gave them a chance [with funding] to conduct it.

So how many villagers saw goldstone in that area?

Only one or two people.

So they [villagers] cannot conduct goldstone mining because nobody gave him permission to do it. Right?

Yes. They thought that their leader would give them a chance to conduct the goldstone mining so they informed the leader. In fact, the leader called business men from outside [of the village] to conduct it. They [villagers who saw goldstone area] requested funding to conduct the goldstone mining separately but nobody gave them the permission to do it.

Can you tell me the name of that leader?

His name is *Bo Lay*⁸ Traw.

What is his position?

Battalion deputy commander [KNLA]. If we look at the situation, the military [KNLA] wants to take power. We are working with the [KNU] administration department. It seems like it is meaningless if you work for the administration department [because] it is as though the administration leaders do not have power.

Which village do the villagers who told the leader about the goldstone area [live in]?

They live in C--- village.

Do you have anything to report that I have not asked you?

No. I do not have anything [more] to report. You have asked me everything and I have answered you.

I mean do you want to say anything?

I want to say that this goldstone project should be stopped. If not, it will not be easy for us because our community will be destroyed. They [businessmen] said that they will conduct the goldstone mining by [digging] 30 holes. We do not know how wide the 30 holes will be. If they continue conducting the goldstone mining, it will affect most of the villagers, but not our leaders.

What about other things? Do you have anything to say?

No. I do not have anything to say now.

Thank you so much.

Yes. Thank you too.

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

- “Nyaunglebin Interview: Saw P---, December 2015,” (December 2016)
- “Nyaunglebin Interview: Naw I---, November 2015,” (October 2016)
- “Nyaunglebin Interview: U A---, January 2016” (September 2016)
- “Two separate landmine incidents happened in Hpapun and Nyaunglebin districts, March and April 2016,” (August 2016)
- “Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Mone Township, April to May 2016,” (August 2016)

⁸ Bo Lay is a Burmese title for a military rank, equal to 2nd Lieutenant.

Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)