



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

September 26, 2017 / KHRG #16-110-A6-I1

Nyaunglebin Interview: Naw C---, December 2016

This Interview with Naw C--- was conducted as part of KHRG's research for the report 'Foundation of Fear: 25 years of villagers' voices from southeast Myanmar' and describes events occurring in Kyaukkyi Township, Nyaunglebin District from 1991 to 2016. Topics addressed in the interview include education, the rule of law and justice system, education, forced displacement, healthcare, development, villagers' livelihoods, land disputes, religion and the peace process.

Interview | Naw C--- (female, 24), B--- village, Kyaukkyi Township, Nyaunglebin District (December 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 December 5th 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: -

Occupation: Student

Position: Villager

On December 5th 2016 I came to meet with a young female villager in B--- village and interviewed her about the future for young people like her.

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.

What is your name?

My name is Naw³ C---

How old are you?

I am 24 years old.

Where do you live?

I live in B--- village, Khel Ken Koh village tract.

In which township do you live?

Ler Doh [Kyaukkyi] Township [Nyaunglebin District].

What ethnicity are you?

I am Karen.

What is your religion?

I am a Christian.

What do you do?

I am a student.

What is the most important human right for you? For example, health, education, freedom of movement and security?

I cannot say that only one human right is most important but I also cannot say that every right [is the most important].

No. You can talk about every human right [that is important for you].

I want to have the freedom of movement and the freedom of work. Every right is important to me but as I am a student the most important human right for me is the right to education. This is just my opinion. I do not know what to say.

Yes. I mean what is the most important human right for you?

Every right is important but you have to be healthy if you want to gain education. Therefore, the right to education can [only] come after the right to healthcare. Things are like that. You must be healthy if you want to study. If you are healthy, you can work to earn a living. To be able to earn a living, you need to [also] have freedom of movement and the right to work. Thus, [if you have these] there is no barrier to block your rights. As a human, we have to use our rights in an appropriate way. Nobody should disturb [take away] our rights. We have to take our rights fully [not one right without another] and we have to do our best. If we can work, we can get [enough] food. If we get food, we are healthy. As long as we are healthy, we can study. If we can study, we will be educated. If we are educated, we can improve our community.

What do you know or think about the rule of law and justice system in your local area or in your village?

My village community has not improved a lot. Regarding the rule of law and justice system [in my village], I am dissatisfied and personally cannot accept it yet because it is not fully practiced.

In the past, my village was not a peaceful place. My village was both a black area [rebel-labelled area] and a mixed control area [between Tatmadaw and ethnic armed groups]. That is why we

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

do not have a proper justice system in our village. We rely on ourselves to solve problems between different ethnic groups but we do not currently have a proper justice system yet. We are now trying step by step to develop a proper justice system. We want to improve the justice system in our village but there are other important issues or concerns that we need to address first.

Freedom of movement is [also] very important for us. If we were to go back to our village there would not be the proper and official laws in place that would allow us to manage our affairs and lead others. We can currently travel slightly more freely [than before] but we cannot go everywhere [we want to go]. We are able to travel freely in order to earn our livings so it has become easier to support our livelihoods even though we still do not get enough food when we work. This has improved our lives and will prevent disagreements or arguments from breaking out and social conflicts and friction from spreading. There are still disagreements between villagers but we are now trying to address them [social conflicts between villagers]. In the past, nobody would confront you if you got drunk in the village because the alcohol would have been bought with your money. Now, village elders have become open-minded [changed their perspectives] after the ceasefire agreement. They [elders] now understand that education is essential for everyone. Therefore, the number of students has increased in the village. In the past, we only had a primary school but we have recently added a middle school so many more students can go and study at school. The education situation in the village has improved. In the past, village elders did not think that education was important. However, those who believed in the importance of education convinced the elderly of its importance. Therefore, they [village elders] came to understand the importance of education.

In the past, they [village elders] would not speak up if other people [in the village] were too loud. Even if they wanted to speak out [complain] they just kept silent. Now, however, they talk openly and explain that if it is too noisy, it will disrupt their children's studies when they [their children] have to read books. If some people want to use loudspeakers, they [village elders] will stop them because they think education is more important. That is why [it is important for] our leaders who are lawyers to improve the justice system in the village. In the past, we did not have any rules for using loudspeakers in the village but we now have rules for using loudspeakers. In the past you could use loudspeakers whenever you wanted to. Now, villagers can only use loudspeakers until 9 pm. Similar changes have taken place in the village. In the past, there were a few instances of theft but because such cases were rare we did not care much about this issue. However, there [is now] a lot of cases of theft in the village so we have had to try and reduce these problems by making [our rules] stricter. Therefore, the past situation is different from the current situation in the village.

So villagers must solve the problems in their village on their own? Or do they work together with the village head to solve problems?

Yes. They solve the problems in the village and also work together with the village head to address issues.

Were there human rights abuses in your area in the past?

Yes. Human rights abuses happened in our area. Do you mean human rights [abuses] related to land or [human rights abuses] related to individual villagers?

I mean human rights abuses related to individual villagers. I am asking about everything related to human rights abuses.

Villagers were unsatisfied with the human rights situation in the past because of the conflict. Even if we wanted to go and work on our hills [hill plantations] we would not go because we did

not feel safe due to the fact that Tatmadaw soldiers were active around the village. That is why we cannot know exactly where they [the villagers] are. Villagers were afraid to go outside because if Tatmadaw soldiers saw villagers outside of the village, they would call the villagers over and ask them many questions. Because we were not able to work on our hill farms, it seemed as if they [the Tatmadaw] had taken away our right to livelihood. That is one thing [human rights abuse]. In the past, if we finished primary school in the village, we had to move to the Myanmar government's middle school in the town to study. However, unpleasant things happened during that time. Sometimes the Tatmadaw closed the route [to the school]. At other times, the KNU [Karen National Union] closed the route [to the school]. Consequently, we were not able to return home when we had summer holidays. After we came back and stayed at home we were not able to go back to our schools. Therefore, we were unable to follow [continue our] school lessons and classes. When we were students we lost our opportunities to study.

When did this start to happen?

It started when I was studying at Standard Three.⁴ When we studied, it [fighting] happened. Thus, we were afraid and we had to stop our studies for one month. Later on, we were forced to flee and return home to our village. Our school had to close because our school teachers also were afraid of staying there. None of our teachers lived in B--- village; they lived in Ler Doh Town so they went back home there. Our education was delayed because teachers were afraid of the fighting and were unwilling to come and teach at the school. And then... what were you asking me about?

I was asking you about the incident date.

Yes. The fighting happened when I was studying at Standard Three. At that time, I was just nine years old. Therefore, the fighting broke out in 2004. Other people probably faced difficulties during the fighting. As for me, I started to face difficulties in 2004. In 2007, I came back to visit my home and then the fighting broke out again. As a result, I was not able to go back and study in the town, which caused my studies to be delayed. Then, I asked the leaders whether I could go and study in the town. In 2008, I was not allowed to take this opportunity to study in the town because the road was closed. That is why I could not study at the school again. In the end, I had to work in my village. Actually, I did not want to work. I just wanted to continue my studies. We lost our chances to study. Our studies were delayed because of the fighting.

Which government closed the road? Did the Tatmadaw close the road?

At that time the Tatmadaw closed the road because they thought that the villagers were involved with the fighting and they would shoot anyone who travelled on the road. They did not want to shoot villagers if they travelled on the road. That is why they closed the road and did not let any villagers cross through. As a result, I lost my right to education.

Did you or your family ever have to flee your village?

We have never fled our village but we did have to hide secretly. What I mean by this is that the fighting happened near our village. Tatmadaw soldiers shot in B--- area. We were not sure whether they were shooting at us. We did not know whether they were shooting at the people. We were afraid of their gunfire and we hid underneath our houses. Tatmadaw soldiers said that they shot people on sight. Other people also probably had to flee [from the village]. As for me, I have never fled my village; we just hid under our house in order to avoid the fighting.

⁴ 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 Standard 6 to Standard 9, and upper secondary school is Standard 10 to Standard 11.

Have any of the human rights abuses been solved?

No. I mean some human rights abuses have been solved and some human rights abuses have not been solved. I was very young at that time so I did not know what happened. I cannot remember the exact date as [more than] six years have already passed. At that time, the Tatmadaw leader did not let villagers work on their farms. He stayed at his army camp and tried to oversee the village with binoculars but it was not very clear to him what was going on in the village. Because he was not able to see with binoculars what villagers were doing in their huts, he ordered the villagers to dismantle all of their huts in order to clearly see what condition the villagers were living in on their farms. Therefore, if villagers wanted to go to work on their farms, they had to get a permission letter from the Tatmadaw. Villagers nicknamed the Tatmadaw leader “*Par Ghoe Del*” [which means Mr. Hut Destroyer] because he ordered villagers to destroy all of their huts.

Do you know the name of that leader?

No. I cannot remember his name because it happened when I was young. I just remember what older people called him: “*Par Ghoe Del*”. I do not know what his real name was. In addition, our father had to take his children if he wanted to go out because he [*Par Ghoe Del*] was more likely to give you permission [to go out] if you took your children with you. If you were alone, he would doubt you and would not believe that you were a local villager. The Tatmadaw would not call on [disrupt] villagers who were accompanied by their children. They only let villagers who were with their children travel freely. Therefore, if village elders wanted to go out, they had to bring their children alongside them. If their children were not able to go and work, they had to go and walk with their parents. The children did not have any choice. Thus, it created barriers for the children.

You said that the leader was known as “*Par Ghoe Del*” because he ordered villagers to destroy all of their huts. Did their leaders punish those who committed human rights abuses?

No, but not all of the soldiers were doing inappropriate things. In the black area⁵ where we live, if we reported the information to their leaders, their leaders would punish the soldiers who made mistakes. Some leaders did not act like that. If the head [army leader] is not good then the bottom [soldiers] will also not be good. Even if the bottom is not good, it would be slightly better for us if the head is good. We will suffer a lot if both the head and the bottom are not good.

Can you give me any examples of punishment for those who committed human rights abuses?

Tatmadaw soldiers arrested Karen villagers who visited us in the village. They [the Karen villagers] were just guests and were not coming to fight. Their leader said that there would not be any problems so long as they were not holding any weapons or guns and not causing any trouble because the guests were only trading things in the village to earn income. People

⁵ Tatmadaw expert Maung Aung Myoe explains that the three-phased Tatmadaw counter-insurgency plan, developed in the 1960s, designates a territory as black, brown or white according to the extent of ethnic armed group (EAG) activity. Phase one transforms a ‘black area’ into a ‘brown area,’ meaning it transforms from an area controlled by EAGs where the Tatmadaw operates, to a Tatmadaw-controlled area where EAGs operate. The second phase is to transform the area from a ‘brown area’ into a ‘white area,’ where the area is cleared of insurgent activities. The final phase is to transform a white area into a ‘hard-core area,’ during which more organisational works are necessary and the government forms pro-government military units for overall national defence. See Maung Aung Myo, *Building the Tatmadaw: Myanmar Armed Forces Since 1948*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009, p. 31-32; see also *Neither Friend Nor Foe: Myanmar's Relations with Thailand Since 1988*, Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies Nanyang Technological University, 2002, p.71.

outside the village heard about [what was happening] and came to visit their friends' houses. Tatmadaw soldiers arrested both the outside people and the house owners. The soldiers also confiscated their [the guests'] gold and their money. In addition, they slapped the guests' faces and beat the guests. Villagers reported what happened to their leaders in order to resolve the case. Then, their [Tatmadaw] leader ordered the soldiers to return the money and gold to the guests and punished the soldiers. I only saw this happen once but I cannot remember on what date it took place.

What do you think should be done about the people who commit human rights abuses during the conflict? For example, if a Tatmadaw officer beat and hit a villager what do you think should be done? What kind of punishment should he [the Tatmadaw officer] face?

The type of punishment he [the Tatmadaw officer] receives should depend on the type of abuse he commits. It is like the saying 'you will have a big footprint if you have a big body.' It does not matter whether he makes a small mistake or not. He should be given a big punishment because he is a Tatmadaw officer. Therefore, he should be more responsible than other people. He should act according to a higher standard than other people because he is an officer. He should think critically about whether he should make a mistake or not and should be a role model for his followers. Therefore, he should be given a big punishment even if he only makes a small mistake because he is a leader. However, if his soldiers make a small mistake, they should only be given a small punishment. If they make a big mistake, they should be given a big punishment. For the leaders, they have to think wisely and carefully before they make any mistakes because they are regarded as honourable role models. Therefore, because they are leaders they must be given big punishments even if they only make small mistakes.

Do you have any examples of [appropriate] punishments such as prison sentences, paying compensation or loss of power?

For example, if there is a leader and his soldiers steal our chicken and ducks that leader should punish his soldiers. We do not [only] want compensation [in this case] as the leader who is responsible should punish his soldiers properly so that they will not steal again; also, they should repay [the owner] more than double the original cost [of the chicken]. If the chicken is priced at 5,000 kyat [US\$3.62], they should repay 15,000 kyat [US\$10.88] as compensation. That way, the [soldiers] will know that they will have to pay 45,000 kyat [as compensation] if they steal 15,000 kyat [US\$10.88]. They will then fear [the punishment] and will not steal again. In addition, they [the soldiers] should pay 800,000 kyat [US\$580.49] if they steal 400,000 kyat [US\$290.24] which is equal to the price of the animals. Therefore, they will be afraid [of the consequences] if they keep stealing. If they continue to steal our animals, they should have to pay a compensation of double or triple the original price of the animals. In addition, their leader should also be removed from his leadership position and should be demoted to a lower position because leaders must be held accountable for their poor management or leadership. As I previously said, you will have a big footprint if you have a big body. The [leader's] mistake is bigger than his soldiers' mistakes because if he cannot lead or manage his soldiers or if he supports his soldiers [in that situation], he will not be a good leader in the future. That is why he [the leader] should be demoted if he makes a mistake; [he should be demoted] because it will be better for us if he [and his soldiers] do not commit further [human rights] abuses again.

What do you think should be done for people who were victims of human rights abuses during the conflict? How should we support or heal them?

It is natural for humans to be greedy. Even if they already have land, they will want more. As a citizen, they will probably want support. What I mean by this is, some people have suffered desperately from the war but the situation has improved. However, we should support or help

them [those who suffered from the war]. Helping them and supporting them does not require a big commitment. We are all human and we all have the same human rights. Some people cannot use their rights so they cannot improve their lives. Other people can use their rights so they can improve their lives. However, even if they are able to use their rights now, they are at a disadvantage compared to those who have been able to use their rights for a long time. Therefore, we should support them. If they want to work on the garden, we have to help them by buying vegetable seeds for them to grow. If they want to work on the farm but they do not have any tools to work with, we have to help them by providing tools or materials for them to work with even if we cannot buy a buffalo for them. Or we can help them by lending other people's buffalos to them. If they can work, they will improve their lives step by step. If we cannot help them, we have to give them rights or chances [to improve]. We should not prevent them from accessing their rights. If their rights are taken away, they will never see the light in their lives [achieve their potential].

Do you think they should be supported with donations of money or should they be provided with machines that they can use to work on the farm?

Regarding the issue of livelihoods, in the past I was not able to access the same rights as others so I was not able to improve my life like other people. I can now use my rights like others so I have to take advantage of this opportunity and try and improve my life. If I am able to do this I will be satisfied. Furthermore, we also have to reflect on whether the new generation is able to go to school or not. If the new generation cannot access their rights they will not be able to improve their lives and may not send their children to school. However, we have a responsibility to support those who have had their rights taken away from them. We should help these people find employment or make them work as daily workers [in order to meet their livelihood needs]. In the past, oppression took many different forms and so it was difficult for these people to improve their lives. Recently, the educational situation has improved a lot, but maybe they cannot send their children to school even if they want to because they do not have money. Even if this is the case, we have to help their children attend school. This will help heal the new generation's suffering.

What is the root cause of human rights abuses in your area?

The root cause of human rights abuse is the fighting; many different issues and problems emerged as a result of the fighting. As citizens, we live under the management and leadership of the government and our leaders, but they also have to rely on us citizens. Therefore, we are related and connected. They [government and leaders] say that if fighting breaks out their goal will be to protect citizens. That may be their goal but that does not reflect the reality in which our rights [as citizens] are abused. It is true that they [KNU and Myanmar government] do not fight with civilians but with each other. Yet as I previously discussed, [this fighting] caused them to close the road which civilians travel on. Actually, they did not close the road [directly] but because they did not stop fighting [it became too dangerous to travel on the road]. I do not know what the political purpose of their [government and leaders] fighting was or who the soldiers are. We civilians are not involved in the fighting and only want to travel freely. Yet even if they did not want to fight the civilians they both [Karen soldiers and Tatmadaw soldiers] said that if they saw villagers outside, they would act as if they [the villagers] were the enemy and shoot at them. Therefore, the fighting prevented villagers from going outside; that is why the fighting is the root cause of human rights abuses [in our area]. If there was no more fighting, even if we were not able to access all of our [human] rights we would at least be able to access half of our [human] rights.

What kind of future do you want for the other young people in the community? For example, do you want improved education for children, improved employment options

for young people, a safer community, a stronger Karen society and increased access to land? What do you want in the future?

There are many things that I want in the future. Education, healthcare and development are very important for me. As a Karen person, we want our [Karen] people to lead us. To be able to lead and manage people, we should have education and knowledge. If we do not have education, we will not be able to improve our people. We want to travel freely. Personally, I want my [Karen] people to lead me but in order to lead people they should first receive an education. That is why education is very important. To get an education, we have to be healthy. There are many things that we need but education and healthcare are very important. We also want our [Karen] people to lead us. The other important thing [that we want in the future] is for there to not be any more conflict or fighting [in our area].

What are the biggest challenges your community, and in particular young people, will have to face in the future?

I think the biggest challenge facing our community is war. If war breaks out again, our community will be forced to relocate, our families will be separated and some people will be killed. There are no bigger challenges than war. If war breaks out, we will be forced to flee and we will suffer from hunger in the jungle. This is what will happen if there is war. If there is peace we will be able to travel and work freely.

However, in my village small land issues and arguments may arise between villagers regarding the right to land possession. These land issues need to be resolved by those who are arguing with each other. It would be good if land issues were resolved. If we have peace, another important challenge is healthcare. There is no real doctor who will give us medical treatment if we are sick in our village so we have to travel, with difficulty, to [the hospital] in Ler Doh [Kyaukkyi] Township. Healthcare is very important in our village. Another challenge is education. As the situation improves, we will have to compete with each other regarding education. Another challenge is that people from other villages will migrate to our village as the situation improves so there will be a lot of people in our village. This will cause a lot of conflict and arguments regarding land and materials between people. Moreover, wealthy individuals will enter our village to pursue business activities. If our leaders are willing to support us, I hope they [business people] will not take our ability to secure our livelihoods away and destroy our lands. If our leaders are not willing to support us or if they do whatever they want to do, it will cause big problems for us because then the business people will cooperate with our leaders to take away and work on our lands. Our leaders will probably justify it [business activities] by saying that [their activities] will benefit the people but I do not foresee that it [business activities] will actually benefit our villagers.

What should the government (KNU or Myanmar) do to make the best situation for people at your age?

The people at my age who are between 20 and 25 years old are the future bright stars [of our community]. Even though some of these people are not educated, they should still be considered the future bright stars because they are still young and because they have their own natural abilities. We cannot know what special talents they might have. We have to give them a chance to work. If they have the potential to improve their community, they should be considered the future bright stars. That is why we have to show them the way to be useful for their community. In order to improve their lives, we have to find them jobs and make them follow the community rules. Some young people are very bad and their behaviours are not good. Some young people want to try bad things; therefore, we have to punish them if they do bad things. If we do that, young children will learn lessons from their lives and experiences. Some young people think that because the situation has improved and they are now able to access

their rights, they should be able to do whatever they want to do. They should use their rights appropriately and should be punished if they misuse their rights. We need to find jobs for the young people who are educated and qualified. We should guide them, train them and show them the right way [to live]. We should not ignore them because they can do many amazing things in their lives. They are neither too old nor too young. That is why our leaders and the Myanmar government should find them jobs that they deserve or [other jobs] for them to do if they cannot find any jobs.

Are young people interested in leadership roles? What do you think of it [leadership roles]?

I am personally interested in leadership roles but this does not mean that I just want to be a leader who takes power. For now, I am not a leader. I am just a follower. I do not know when I will become a leader. I will just try to do the best I can as a follower. Even though some of the current leaders now are not educated I just do what they [the current leaders] ask me to do. I follow them because I want to be a good follower. You have to be a good follower if you want to be a good and respectful leader. I want to be a leader but I do not want to take power over people. This is not because I do not want to lead my people. It is because I have to wait for the right time and place to lead my people. If some people are smarter than me, I will let them be my leaders and I will follow them. If there is no leader, I will take a stand for my people as a graceful and respectful leader. For other young people, they are also interested in leadership roles but they are not very eager to be active. I heard that they [other young people] said they will act differently because they saw some people [young leaders] acting wrongly. In reality, I do not see them [other young people] taking on leadership roles. This is just the word [rumours I hear]. They [young people] have a desire to take on leadership roles but not all of them want to take on leadership roles. Some young people do not say that they want to take leadership roles but actually they are energetic about becoming leaders. This is what I see [regarding young people who are interested in leadership roles].

What do you hope to be doing in five years' time?

In five years' time, I will be trying to secure my livelihood. Even though I will be trying to support my livelihood, I will also try to help the people in the environment around me. I will not only consider how my business will benefit myself but I will also try to help the people that live around me if they need help. I am currently trying to help the people around me and have not yet started my own business. I have been prioritising the people [around me] rather than myself. I have not married yet as I am young. Thus, it is not hard to secure my livelihood. As I am single, I have many opportunities to help my people. If I get married or if I get a family one day, it will not be as easy to give my time to my people. At that point in time, I will work to support my family's future but also I will try to help the people as much as I can if it is necessary to do so. As a human, I will try to fulfil all my duties and responsibilities. All people should be responsible for helping [other] people's health, religious and social needs. I will help people regarding these three things [health, religious and social needs] as a young person in the future. This is what I am thinking [planning] but I will definitely do it. It would be better if I am healthy. If I was to die an early death, I would have to let it [my plans and desires] go.

What are you most worried about for your individual/personal future?

As a citizen, I am most worried about the fighting. If there is no fighting, we can improve our community with our own abilities even if the leaders do not support us. If they [leaders] cannot support us, they should at least let us access our rights and give us opportunities. If we are able to use our rights in the right way, our lives will be improved. If fighting breaks out, we will not be able to do what we hope to do. We will not be able to access our human rights and our future will be bleak. It will not be possible [for us young people] to become future bright stars. I do not

want war. For example, there are some people who have not passed Standard Ten and [other] people think that they are not smart, but they do not understand the situation. Everyone may have rights but not everyone has a chance to use their rights. My siblings and I had to live in [several] different places during the fighting period. I lived in B--- area so I was not able to access all of my rights due to the fighting. My brother, on the other hand, was able to access all of his rights because there was no fighting in the place where he lived so he was able to travel freely in his area. Thus, he was able to work and improve his life. As for me, I was not able to travel freely to school or to work. That is why [I believe that] everyone is naturally smart but we do not all have a chance or right to use it [our natural abilities]. I was not able to improve my life a lot [due to the surrounding circumstances]. That is why I do not want the war. Some people think that villagers in B--- area are very lazy and that they therefore cannot improve their village. It is not like that [those beliefs are incorrect]. Our village was not improved because we did not have a chance to use our rights. During the fighting, we dared not go [outside] to study or work. So how would it be possible for us to improve our village? If we went outside, we would be shot and killed. That is why it was very difficult to support our livelihood. If there is no fighting, we would be able to use our abilities to improve our lives. If our [individual] lives are improved, we can improve our village.

What do you want to say to the Karen youth about how they can improve their community in the future?

I want to tell the Karen youth to keep their hearts beautiful. There are a lot of people whose hearts are not beautiful even though they are educated. Personally, I feel that a beautiful heart is a person's most important characteristic. If you have a beautiful heart, your thoughts and attitudes will be good and the work that you do will also be good. That is why good things will happen to those who have beautiful hearts. How do I explain this? I just want to encourage educated people by emphasising the importance of having a beautiful heart. Currently, the situation has improved and education has become essential for everyone. Due to these changes, we have become educated and can now access more of our rights than other people. We should not only use our rights to benefit ourselves and our families. For example, when we finish school we might only want to teach if we get a salary. We are not supposed to act like that. Even if we do not receive a salary, we should be satisfied with what we already have. We should keep our hearts beautiful so that we can share our education and knowledge with the community. If we do this, our community will be improved and we will also receive merit. If you have a chance to donate your education and knowledge, you should just donate it [without demanding a salary]. Do not hide it [your education and knowledge]. You should not avoid teaching or sharing your education with others just because you do not receive a salary and believe that without a salary you will be unable to improve your life. You should not only teach in order to receive a salary. You may believe that if you receive a salary then you can buy whatever you want and your life condition will improve. But that is not what should happen. You should instead keep your heart beautiful because even if you do not receive a salary if you teach the children [properly], then they will become literate. If they [children] are well-educated, then they will become future bright stars. As they grow older, they will become smarter than you. If we do not teach them when they are young, their lives will not improve when they grow up. How can I explain this? If we teach them while they are still young, then when they grow up they will be smarter than us. Therefore, the future will be bright. But if we do not teach them, their [bright] futures will fade away. That is why I do not want young people to behave or think like that [only working to receive a salary]. Just keep your heart beautiful.

Some people have had opportunities to study medicine and healthcare so they should advise village elders how to take care of their health. They should educate young children and guide them so that they can take care of their health such as by teaching them how to keep their body

clean and how to maintain their hygiene. If these children are healthy then they will get a chance to study and their lives will improve. We should explain [healthcare issues] to village elders clearly if they do not understand healthcare. We should not blame them for lacking knowledge about healthcare because they did not have any chance to learn or study when they were young. We should explain [healthcare issues] to them with love and with kindness. We have to explain [healthcare issues] to them until they understand and accept our thoughts; we have to be patient.

Some people do not want to send their children to school because they do not understand [the importance of] education; however, we have to explain to them clearly the importance of education. For example, we should explain to them, *“You have to send your children to school. If your children do not study at school, their lives will not improve. Also, you should not ignore them after you send them to school. You have to guide them towards the right path and you have to be with them.”* This is what teachers have to do [explain to the elders].

As for those people who were not educated, they should not be lazy as the situation improves. They should learn as much as they can. They should not believe that just because they were unable to attend school when they were young and do not know how to read and write that they should live like this [a simple life]. Actually, they should not think like that. How can I explain this? As the situation improves, we have to also improve ourselves. Even if we cannot improve at the same rate, we should know what is going on. We have to find out [what is happening]. If we do not understand [what is happening], we need to ask people who understand it [what is happening]. Some people think that people who understand things [because of education] are younger than them so they do not want to ask younger people [to explain what is happening]. That is not the attitude they should maintain. We should adopt an attitude in which we acknowledge that we are not educated and do not understand some things so we have to ask others to explain to us what is happening, even if they are younger than us. We have to study things around us. If we see that something [that we study] is good, we have to follow and do it [the good thing we have studied]. If we do not learn or if we stay in our own place, we will never know [learn] anything [new].

There is a saying, *“You will never become a good person if you never move to another village.”* According to this saying, we should not close our eyes and just stay in our village. We should learn and study as much as we can. We should go and study in other towns and cities if we are given the opportunity to do so. If we only stay in our village and work here, we will never know [learn] what is going on in other towns and cities. We will never know [learn] how they were able to improve and develop their cities and towns. So we should know [learn] how they improved. I do not mean to say that our lives will [only] be improved if we go to work in foreign countries. We can also improve our lives in our village but we have to recognise that we need to study and learn in order to improve. We should not close our eyes and ears. We should not think that we will be fine if we do not study or that our brothers and sisters will be fine if we do not send them to school to study. We should not have that kind of attitude. We need to explain to our sisters and brothers the importance of education by providing different examples to them. If we give them opportunities to study they will be able to improve their lives and communities.

What do you know about the ceasefire in 2015?⁶

⁶ On October 15th 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 Burma/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,

I just know that it was an agreement to stop fighting. I think even though we cannot fight with our guns, we can fight with our words or pens.

What do people call that ceasefire?

I heard that people called it the NCA [Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement]. This is just the name of the ceasefire. The leaders call it the NCA.

What do you think about it [NCA]? How is the ceasefire relevant to you?

I think that the NCA is supposed to signal the end of fighting throughout the country because they have already signed an agreement to stop the fighting. However, a lot of fighting is still ongoing. This is how I understand the NCA. This NCA is relevant to me because I am a [Myanmar] citizen. Regarding the [risk of] fighting between the Myanmar government [Tatmadaw] and Karen armed groups, my concerns for my [Karen] people have been reduced. Prior to the NCA, there was fighting between the Myanmar government [Tatmadaw] and ethnic armed groups including Karen armed groups. Therefore, I always wondered and worried about my Karen people who had been killed and shot. Now, since they [the KNU] have already signed the NCA the fighting between the Tatmadaw and Karen soldiers has decreased but at the same time, fighting has increased between the Tatmadaw and other ethnic armed groups. Thus, my concerns for my Karen people have decreased. Because of that, I am happy and satisfied. This happiness and satisfaction will [hopefully] last until I die. I hope it [lasts]. It [happiness] should not only last for a short time. This happiness and satisfaction about the NCA will continue until our new generations see and taste it [peace after the NCA]. I do not want our new generations to see [experience] fighting.

What is your perspective and feeling about the peace process between the Myanmar government and the ethnic armed groups?

As I am a young citizen, I do not completely understand the peace process. I do not know how successfully it is being implemented. I only know about the NCA that they signed and I do not want any more fighting in this country. I do not want them [the Myanmar government] to ignore the voices and demands of the people. The people suffered from the fighting prior to the NCA but this suffering may disappear after the NCA was signed. Therefore, the people will make demands and requests to the Myanmar government. The Myanmar government should not blame or criticise the people. They should instead discuss and negotiate with the peoples' requests and desires. I do not want anyone to start a war. If somebody makes a mistake, he or she should be punished based on that mistake. If we can forgive the mistake he or she makes, we should also forgive him or her. If they make a big mistake, they should be punished in accordance with the law in a fair and just way. Even though the NCA was signed, there may still be a lot of conflict among the people as the population increases. These conflicts can be about anything but should not lead to fighting with guns. That is why the local Myanmar government should try their best to solve these issues. I do not want non-violent conflict to become violent conflict.

October 15th 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 15th 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 1st 2015. The signing of the NCA followed the January 12th 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the KNU and Burma/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.

Do you mean they are still fighting even though they have agreed to the NCA?

What I mean is that the biggest solution [to prevent further fighting] now is the Myanmar government. There are no issues with the Kachin, Shan and Kayah armed groups. We only have to deal with the Myanmar government. When we signed the NCA, we only had to deal with the Myanmar government. It [the fate of the peace process] depends primarily on the Myanmar government. Other ethnic groups like the Shan and the Kachin have suffered from the fighting prior to the NCA. In order to sustain the peace process, the Myanmar government has to stop the fighting and agree to a ceasefire. Therefore, before they can sustain the peace process, they have to first make sure that the fighting has completely stopped. After the NCA was signed suddenly, the people probably were unable to forget how they suffered during the fighting and also may have still had concerns in their mind. When they [ethnic armed groups] spoke to the Myanmar government, maybe they sometimes said the wrong things. If they have conflicts or disagreements during the discussion, they should not let it [disagreement] turn into a war or into fighting. We have to solve it [the conflicts] step by step.

Do you mean that other ethnic armed groups have agreed to a ceasefire with the Myanmar government for a long time but that our Karen armed group has only agreed to a ceasefire recently? Is that right?

In the past, the Karen armed groups agreed to a ceasefire but the fighting still continued afterwards. You know that. Do you not understand what I am saying? The Karen armed groups signed a ceasefire agreement with Myanmar government in the past but they both argued and disagreed with each other when they later discussed what they wanted to do next. This disagreement caused the fighting to restart. Now they have signed a ceasefire agreement again. They will probably have disagreements when they negotiate with each other. It would be better if they do not have any disagreements, but if they do I do not want those disagreements to lead to fighting. They should try to figure it out step by step. I do not want war. I do not love war. If we have issues, we must try and solve them. Small issues should not escalate into war.

Are there people in your village who went to other countries or cities to find jobs?

There are a lot of people in our village who go to other cities to find jobs. Some people really wanted to go to other countries but they did not have any opportunity to leave [the village]. As for me, I want to go to other countries but I do not have any opportunity to leave [the village]. There are many reasons why we are unable to go to other countries. Some people do not have enough money to leave. Some peoples' parents prevent them from leaving. Some people cannot go because of their bad health conditions. While there are a lot of people in our village who go to other cities to find a job no one from our village has gone to another country.

Do you think your community is developed in terms of health, education, communication, transportation, living standards and administration?

There are no big improvements to our community but we are still trying to develop it. We have only just started to improve our community. In the past, we only had a primary school with a few teachers in our village. After our headmistress reported it to Myanmar government, more schools and more classrooms were constructed and the number of school teachers increased. Although our educational situation is not perfect, we can say nonetheless that it has improved slightly. Regarding transportation, in the past a lot of people did not travel to our village because of the fighting and only travelled from their places to our village once a month because of transportation difficulties. After the ceasefire, a lot of people travelled to our village so we can conclude that the transportation situation has slightly improved. Regarding administration, it is not very effective but people are still trying to improve it. Regarding healthcare, in the past it was difficult to call Myanmar government doctors if we were sick but recently Myanmar government

doctors have entered our village. Since our Karen people are usually only health workers, if we get serious illnesses, we have to call for Myanmar government doctors. In the past, when we became sick we did not feel safe calling for a doctor at night. This caused some sick people to suffer until they died. After the ceasefire, we were able to call for the doctors to come and provide medical treatment any time we needed it. These changes are due to the decrease in fighting. In the past, people would only come to our village by motorbike. Now, cars are used to travel to our village. This has made it easier to send sick people to the hospital in the town. In the past, in order to send sick people to the clinics we had to carry the sick people [on foot]. So the situation has improved slightly even though it still has not changed dramatically.

In which years, from 1992 until now, do you think the most human rights abuses were committed in your area?

The most human rights abuses happened... I think it happened because of the fighting.

In what year [were the most human rights abuses committed in your area]?

When the most furious fighting happened, other people suffered more than I did. I suffered due to the war for two years. We villagers did not suffer a lot from human rights abuses during the fighting because soldiers killing one another are not human rights abuses; they have to kill each other because they both willingly chose to fight.

I did experience a human rights abuse, however, in 2010. In 2010, I was sitting for my exam. I took the exam in the summer of 2010 and fighting broke out next to the village during *Thingyan* festival [in April]. We therefore had to cancel the *Thingyan* festival and so it seemed to us that we had lost our rights. This was the only time I saw this happen with my own eyes. We put *Thanaka* [traditional makeup]⁷ on our faces and we were ready to celebrate *Thingyan* festival but suddenly fighting broke out and we heard the sound of gunfire. We had to flee. During that time, we were not able to travel or work freely. This made it difficult for villagers to support their livelihoods. I clearly remember this. At that time, [Infantry Battalion⁸] #53 [from Tatmadaw] was active around our village. They [Tatmadaw] said that the Karen soldiers shot at them first and so they shot back at them [the Karen soldiers]. As we are villagers, we did not feel safe speaking up. When we were preparing to celebrate *Thingyan*, the Tatmadaw saw Karen soldiers on the way [road] and they started to shoot. The fighting happened because they did not inform or notify each other about their traveling plans. Although villagers directly witnessed the fighting they dared not say anything.

You mean the Tatmadaw fought [with the Karen soldiers] by accident? Not [because of the activities] of Karen soldiers?

Yes. We knew that Karen soldiers did not come to our village. The Tatmadaw said that they saw Karen soldiers and so they started shooting. Actually, this is not true. They [Tatmadaw] just shot without justification. We wanted to speak the truth but we dared not speak out. It seemed that our rights had been taken away.

⁷ Thanaka is a yellow-white paste applied to the face and sometimes arms by Burmese women (and less commonly men). It comes from grinding the bark, wood or roots of a thanaka tree with a little water. The paste is believed to protect and cool the skin in the sun, as well as to improve one's complexion. See "[Beauty That's More Than Skin Deep](#)," *The Irrawaddy Magazine*, August 5th 2011.

⁸ An Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprises 500 soldiers. However, most Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Yet up to date information regarding the size of battalions is hard to come by, particularly following the signing of the NCA. They are primarily used for garrison duty but are sometimes used in offensive operations.

Are there any development projects happening in your village/community/areas?

Yes, there are development projects underway in our village. Our village head is trying to work with villagers to improve the water system to get easier access to water. If we get water easily, it would be a small improvement for our village. Villagers are also starting to raise goats for the village charity. Also, we are growing cardamom plantation for sale to raise money. All of the money we raise will be spent on community development projects such as education, healthcare and so on.

Who came to organise those projects?

CIDKP (Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People).

Do they benefit the community? I mean do these projects benefit the villagers?

We cannot say whether it will benefit [the villagers] or not. We will have to wait and see. You will not be able to know the result [of the projects] right away. However, I can say that these projects are good for our community. For instance, let us examine our water system [project]. It benefits villagers because we do not need to carry water from faraway places. However, with regards to the issue of raising goats and growing the cardamom plantations, we cannot know when we will profit. We have to take actions step by step and we have to wait for months [before we can find out if we have benefited from the projects]. Therefore, we cannot say for the certain whether it [the projects] will benefit [the villagers] or not. However, I personally believe that it will benefit [the villagers].

Did they [CIDKP] inform and discuss with the villagers [the details of the development projects]?

Yes. They [CIDKP] informed and discussed with the villagers [the details of the development projects]. They told the villagers that community development should be according to the villagers' desires. If villagers do not approve, then they should not do it [community development projects]. They only gave advice to the villagers about what they should do. They work together with villagers and request permission from the villages before doing anything.

So they [CIDKP] will act if villagers think that [the development projects] are good and villagers will also act if they think [the development projects] are good for villagers?

Yes.

So it [the situation in terms of development projects] is good. What kind of development do you want to see in your community? How do you want it [the development projects] to be carried out?

If any development project is implemented, it should be clearly marked whose lands belongs to whom. [People] must measure the lands [beforehand] to identify which land belongs to whom and then land grants should be given [to those who own their land]. The lands should be measured systematically and land grants should be provided to those who own land. For example, if somebody knows the area of his lands, he or she would be responsible for cleaning the trash on his or her lands. This is not what currently happens. Trash and garbage are left on the land and nobody takes any responsibility to clean or get rid of the garbage because nobody knows which area of land belongs to whom. This is just an example. If they knew [who owned the land on] their land area, it would be easier for the local authorities who take care of the environment because people would not throw garbage on the land and not clean it [afterwards]. This would affect the environment so people should be punished if they harm the environment.

Also, education and religion are important for basic community improvements. Regarding religion, religious buildings should be properly constructed in the village. Education, religion and

the economy are very important for village development. We cannot only improve the education situation. We cannot only improve the economic situation. We should improve all of them [education, religion and economy]. That is why we should also improve the religious situation. Honourable religious leaders should be in the village and schools should also be repaired. The school we have now is not very good. School buildings should be firmly constructed. School teachers should know how to run the school and how to keep it clean. The image or structure of a school should be decorated with beautiful flowers. I think that the school should have a compound and should be fenced. It would be better for teachers and students to teach in the school. Teachers should not only teach children with schoolbooks but also other different things [about the world]. The school building is essential. It would be good for students if we have a good school building. For example, if we do not have a good school building and the roof is poor, the students will not be able to concentrate on what teachers are teaching when it rains. To be able to improve the village, lands should be measured systematically and schools should be firmly constructed in order to have a good and safe class. Also, religious buildings should be constructed better. Religious leaders should be educated and honourable. If the education, religion, economic and healthcare situations are improved, the village community will improve.

OK. Do you want to report anything that I have not asked you?

What do you mean 'I want to report'? What kind of case would I want to report?

You can report what you want to report. It can be anything that I have not asked you. What are your views and feelings? Anything you want.

I want to report many things. Will you listen to me?

As you are a citizen, you can report what you want to report.

You mean what do I want to report as a citizen or as a woman?

You can report what you want to report as a woman.

As a youth, I want to report that we have to improve our community. If some people do not know how to improve, we have to train and educate them. If we train and guide them properly, they will know how to improve their community. This applies to the people who want to help and support [us villagers]. Some people [donors] said that they give support [fund] to [the villagers] but [villagers] did not do anything [for community development] and so they said they will stop supporting and helping them. If that is how you act, then you do not really want to help people with your heart. You are acting as if you want to test people. If you really want to improve the community, you have to help people with your whole heart. You also have to come and check whether it [the situation] has improved or not. If things do not go well, you have to discuss with the people how it should be improved. This applies for any organisation [who wants to help people].

There is something [else] that I do not feel happy about. In March [2016], Karen social workers came to donate rice to villagers that were funded by Japanese donors. However, they [Japanese donors] had to get permission [from the Myanmar government] before they came to donate rice to villagers which took a long time. People had to wait until 4 pm [to receive the donated rice]. When I went there by car and saw the situation like that and I did not feel happy.

I also want to say that the Myanmar government and ethnic groups have already signed the ceasefire agreement and started the peace process. Burmese people [in the city] can have freedom and rights if they report [something to the Myanmar government] but as for the Karen people in rural areas, they do not have rights and freedom because they have to get permission [from the Myanmar government] if rice is donated to them. I am not happy about that.

Oh, are you saying that if Japan donors want to donate rice to villagers the Myanmar government will disturb them?

Yes. The local Myanmar government said that they will have to report it to their leaders [if Japan donors want to donate rice to villagers]. This is what they report but I think that this is a means of disturbance.

So you mean anyone who has power should not disturb people who want to help and support communities?

Yes. If it is fine for them [people who have power] to not provide help or support but they should not disturb us. I am not happy if they do disturb us. As a citizen, I do not want any actor to disturb the people who want to help or support communities. I do not want anyone to disturb these people, not even for one minute.

What time did it happen?

Maybe in March or May [2016] but I am sure it did not happen in June [2016]. If you want to know more details [about what happened], you can ask the leaders in the village.

OK. Do you have other things to say?

How can I explain this? I do not like the leadership of our Karen people. It [administration] does not work systematically. I do not mean that I want to blame and criticise them. It does not mean that I look down them. I just want to say that the leadership is weak. If possible, I wish that it would be strengthened. If the leadership is weak, our people will not be able to improve. As we are Karen people, we want to rely on Karen leaders. If our leaders are weak in leadership, our dignity will be degraded. If other [ethnic] people want to say bad comments about us, they will say them. Also, our punishment system should be improved. For example, people fight with each other and report the case in court but [the legal system] does not solve the problem and does not punish people. I am not sure but I want to say that people who have power [judges] should give fair and just punishments if people make a mistake. If we go to the court, the [judge] does not want to properly solve the problem. It seems other people want to look down our people. For people who make a mistake, if they should be punished; our leaders should punish them properly. If they should not be punished, they should be forgiven and our leaders should solve the problem [diplomatically]. People who have rights or the power to judge should do the best [they can]. If they do not want to solve their problem, people will not be willing to do anything [go to court and report their cases]. We should respect each other. Otherwise, people will not want to rely on them [leaders or judges].

Thank you.

Is that it? Thank you too.

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

- “Nyaunglebin Interview: Naw A---, November 2016,” (September 2017)
- “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)

Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District

