



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

December 7, 2016 / KHRG # 16-40-A1-11

Thaton Interview: U A---, 2016

This Interview with U A--- describes events occurring in Thaton Township, Thaton District, in early 2016, including ethnic and religious discrimination and Min Lwin Mountain mining.

- *U A--- describes how Muslim people in B--- village, Pein Nel Taw village tract, Thaton Township, Thaton District have been discriminated against by the Burma/Myanmar government regarding their rights to have an ID card. As they did not have ID cards, Muslim students were rejected from studying at the Burma/Myanmar government college.*
- *U A--- also states that many houses around his village would be destroyed and damaged if a company conducts stone mining on Min Lwin Mountain near to B--- village, Pein Nel Taw village tract.*

Interview | U A---, (male, 58), B--- village, Thaton Township, Thaton District (2016)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Thaton District in early 2016 and is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹ This interview was received in May 2016 along with other information from Thaton District, including one other interview.²

Ethnicity: Muslim

Religion: Islam

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Casual labour

Position: Villager

What is your name?

My name is U³ A---.

How old are you?

¹ KHRG trains community members in southeast Burma/Myanmar to document individual human rights abuses using a standardised reporting format; conduct interviews with other villagers; and write general updates on the situation in areas with which they are familiar. When conducting interviews, community members are trained to use loose question guidelines, but also to encourage interviewees to speak freely about recent events, raise issues that they consider to be important and share their opinions or perspectives on abuse and other local dynamics.

² In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in southeast Burma/Myanmar, KHRG aims to make all field information received available on the KHRG website once it has been processed and translated, subject only to security considerations. For additional reports categorised by Type, Issue, Location and Year, please see the Related Readings component following each report on KHRG's website.

³ U is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

I am 58 years old.

Where do you live?

I live in B--- village, Pein Nel Taw village tract [P'Nweh Klah], Thaton Township.

What is your ethnicity?

I am Muslim [*Ka la*⁴].

Are you married?

Yes, I am.

What is your occupation in the village?

I am just a casual labourer. I also have a duty to look after the village as an elder person.

How many houses are there in the village?

There are more than 50 houses in B--- village.

Is there a school in the village?

There is no school in the village.

If not, where can the children go to study?

The children in B--- village go to study at the school in the upper area of Pein Nel Taw village [tract].

Up to which Standard do they teach in Pein Nel Taw's school?

There is a Myanmar school and a Muslim school within Pein Nel Taw's school. For the Muslim school, the children can study until Fourth Standard.

Oh, they have Muslim school there?

Yes, they have.

What about male teachers and female teachers?

There are six male teachers in that school but they do not have female teachers.

Does the Myanmar government support school teachers in that [Muslim] school?

No, they do not support [them].

So who supports the school teachers?

Only the villagers support the school teachers.

Where do those six male school teachers live?

Four of them live in B--- village. The other two teachers are from Thaton.

Are they all Muslim?

Yes.

After the children finish Fourth Standard from that school, do they move to study at the Myanmar government school?

⁴ *Ka la*, is a Burmese/Myanmar term which is sometimes used to refer to individuals in Burma/Myanmar who are perceived to have a darker skin colour. In Kayin state, it is often associated specifically with followers of Islam (Muslims), although this association is sometimes erroneous, and Muslim individuals do not typically self-identify with this term.

Muslim school is different from Myanmar government school. This Muslim school is a religious school. So if the children finish this at Muslim school, they could go to study at Myanmar government school in C--- village.

What about if they finish Fourth Standard in the Muslim school?

After they finish, they also could to attend religious school in Thaton or Kyaikaw. They have a Muslim high school there.

Some Muslim children are attending Myanmar government school. Are they different from the children who are studying at religious school?

Muslim children who attend religious school could also study at Myanmar government school.

Oh, they go to both schools?

Yes. They finish their classes at 8:00 AM at religious school. Then, they take their breakfast. After that, they could go to Myanmar government school because they start to study at 9:00 AM there. So they go to different schools at two separate times.

I would like to interview you regarding education. Where do your children go to study if they have to study at the middle school? Is there a middle school in C--- village?

Yes. They have a Myanmar government high school in C--- village. If the students in B--- village want to attend 10th Standard, they have to go to the high school in C--- village. I have three daughters. Two of them are studying at 9th Standard. The other one is studying at 10th Standard and she is very clever. She passed 10th Standard the first time. However, I was angry at that year [when she passed] because the local Myanmar government came to register the students to give them Burmese ID cards at the high school but all of my daughters were not allowed to get ID cards. My wife does not have an ID card but I have one because I got it when I was a village elder [in a responsible village position], I could not remember the exact time [when I got the ID card]. Therefore, I tried to talk to U T--- [former village head] to make my daughters get ID cards because they need ID cards when they go to study at the college. He rejected my words. All my words were useless. Now the Myanmar government came to make ID card for the students at the school but our Muslim children were rejected because they [the government] said we have to go and ask for ID cards at the Township level if we want to make one. It is not easy to make an ID card if we go to the Township office. Also, we have to pay a lot of money. Some Muslim people reported the case many times but in the end, they just lost their money. So I withdrew my daughters from the school that year. Then, some female school teachers came to say to me, *"Your children are very clever, why do you stop them studying?"* I said, *"You are right, teacher. My children are good at studying but it requires a lot of things [challenges] if they go to college without an ID card. Without an ID card, how can they go so far in the future?"* Nothing [good] will come [from this process]. So I stopped my daughter from going to study. We sent our children to the school for 9 or 10 years but finally we lost everything before they could get to college, because of the ID card issue. Most of the Muslim children left the school.

Now what are your daughters doing?

They just help us in the house. They are just now doing odd jobs such as working on the farm and looking after the cows.

They just do odd jobs for the family; they do not study anymore?

Not anymore.

Is there anyone [Muslim] in B--- village who has attended the college?

No one has attended the college. The children just left the school after they studied in 10th Standard. Because of the Myanmar ID card issue, they could not have a chance to attend the college and nothing special will happen [they will not have good opportunities in the future because they cannot receive a full education]. So it's better to leave school because they could not do anything without an ID card if they keep studying; so the parents got angry because of

that [ID issue] and they made their children stop studying. When the Myanmar government made ID cards for students at the school, Muslim students were not included in the list. Even if we [parents] have ID cards, they just discriminated against Muslim children so that I was disappointed about it.

What do you want to say regarding healthcare? Do you feel like they discriminate against you?

Regarding healthcare, it is fine when we go to the clinic. They look after us. We have no problem with it.

Now the local government plans to create ID cards for the villagers. Did you hear about that?

It is not that I have heard [about that]. Every year they [local government] come to the village and they make ID cards for the villagers who are Buddhist but nobody calls us who are Muslim. They even do not inform us. We see that they are making [plans] for ID cards but they do not call *Ka la* to make ID cards. So how can we go and get ID cards?

Do you try to talk to the village administrator about making an ID card?

I already talked to the village administrator but it did not work. They said we have to apply to the District office if we want ID card. How can we apply for an ID card from the District office if we do not have money? Some Muslims have applied for an ID card from the District office but most of them did not get one. They faced many problems when they applied such as [requests for their] family household and ancestor record issues. So they just lost their money and came back home without getting an ID card.

How long you have you been in B--- village?

I was born in B--- village. I've been here for 58 years.

What do most of the people do for their livelihood in B--- village?

Mostly, we earn our living by fishing and catching frogs. No one here has any farmland. We just borrow other people's cultivated land to grow on because no one sells the land even if we want to buy it for a family settlement. They just reject it. They do not want to sell it to *Ka la*. We have suffered from that kind of oppression.

You said they reject if you want to buy the land. Who are they?

How do we say here? It happened in the past. I used to buy land to live on for my family but when I asked the price of the land they refused to sell it to me in the end. Another thing is my cousin, who lives in C--- village, he was called to buy the land for 2,800,000 kyat [US \$2144.54]⁵. He had bought it already but the land owner came back and returned money to my cousin two weeks later. He did not sell the land to my cousin anymore because my cousin is *Ka la*.

What do you want to say regarding those types of ethnic discrimination?

In the past, I could not talk about it. Actually, I have a lot of things to say. I have not talked about my suffering for 58 years. If we talk about it openly, we are a minority ethnic group and I am afraid that we will be assassinated by someone. As you know our situation, we have no guarantee for [our] security. We worry that something bad will happen if we talk about our suffering. That is why we have kept our suffering silent until now. I have plenty of words to say.

How do you feel if you would have equal rights?

⁵ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the November 11th 2016 official market rate of 1305 kyat to US \$1

I [would] feel happy and good. I have a good attitude because I have been an elder person for a long time. Different village heads have changed 7 times but I have not changed yet [still working with each village head]. Whoever [village head] has changed, I always participate in helping villagers. I assist KNU [Karen National Union] social cases and I also help the Myanmar government by working in society as needed. I always told my nephew that we regularly help the village celebrating the Honouring Teacher Ceremony every year. So we donate 100,000 or 200,000 kyat [US \$76.59 to \$153.18] to Honouring Teacher Ceremony each year. We want to do [good things] like that. We can participate in donating money. All I want actually is [that we] help each other but things do not happen as we hope.

What do you know about Min Lwin [*Maw Lay*] Mountain case? Can you tell me even if you know a small amount?

Regarding that case, firstly they [the responsible people] called us for a meeting. There was the Thaton Township administrator in the meeting. U Aye Hlaing also participated in the meeting.⁶ The day we were called for a meeting: when we arrived at the meeting, we were asked to sign. They [said that they] would build the road better; they would give money. They tried to persuade people with incentives. We finally signed although we did not know anything because we were the last group who arrived at the meeting. After we signed, they checked our signatories and they said that the agreement which is implemented is won when they have divided the number of people [counted the majority vote]. It is like most people agreed. As I told you in the afternoon, we were scolded because of that agreement despite not being aware of anything. They said like, *“You, Ka la, signed the agreement paper so you sold the mountain”*. I told them, *“We, Ka la, have only 50 houses but you have more than 800 houses. How can we win? Talk carefully and wisely”*. This was a small argument. Nothing was special [there was no big problem]. U M--- [said], *“Do not do that again,”*. How do we say? He just maintains the mountain. If we think about it carefully, we have to consider [the benefits of the mountain]. It is good to have this mountain. We do not cut any bamboo or trees [on it] but this mountain can benefit us because when Cyclone Nargis happened, one of the trees in my house compound was almost blown away. If this mountain were not here, my whole house would probably be destroyed. Only the roof of my house was destroyed. This is just [because of] the protection of this mountain [as a wind break]. What I mean is that money is nothing for us. We could not support our lives with the money they give [as compensation]. Even if they give me 1,000,000 kyat [US \$765.91], I could not exchange it with this mountain. We could not support our lives for 100 years with 1,000,000 kyat [US \$765.91]. I do not know if most people agree with it but I do not want to sell this mountain. Anyway, I would not become poor without this mountain because I have eaten rice for 58 years [I can take care of myself]. That is my attitude.

The people in the villages around Min Lwin Mountain [could] become united [collaborate] and they should maintain this mountain. So what do you think or wish if you work together [collaborate] with nearby villages?

This mountain has existed for so long, before I was born. We could get benefit from this mountain. We can take a rest in the shadow of this mountain. So I am not happy if this mountain has been sold. As I told you before, we only can support ourselves for two months with the amount of money they give but they [the company] can support themselves for 100 years if they get money from this mountain. So how can we exchange such little money with this mountain? In the meeting, I said, *“We, people, are crazy because we have to sign the agreement paper after we looked at many different faces [after they felt peer pressure because other villagers had signed the agreement]”*. It looks like we are afraid. Nobody can tell what reality is in our mind [what we really think or feel]. At that time, I told the people that if the leader says it is good, the people will [also] say it is good. If the leader says it is bad, the people will [also] say it is bad. We have to nod our heads [in agreement] if the leader says it is good. Now [in this case] it was not like that [there was no guidance from their leader]. It is because he [other villagers] signed so I

⁶ KHRG is in the process of following up on the position of this person within the community.

signed. It is because she [other villagers] signed so I signed. It is because you⁷ signed so I signed. The people are going crazy. They have to attend meetings [like this] 3 or 4 times.

What would you think if the company could work on this mountain? Have you thought about what challenges would you face?

I have thought about that. I will be fine as I live here far from the mountain but the village and the house near to my house will be destroyed or damaged because of stone mining [on the mountain]. I do not feel happy about that but if the government thinks that it is not [good] to do stone mining for the people, they will stop. We will agree if our leaders here agree because we are their people. We could not support ourselves with the amount of money the company would give but we could not object to our leader as a person [could not disagree with their leader as they are only civilians]; if our leader agrees we can still live like this because of their guidance. Maybe you have heard about the riot that happened in Mate Htee Lar [Meiktila] previously.⁸ It [anti-Muslim sentiment] had spread quickly. One day when I went out, I met with the Township leader [from the KNU] in the street. We talked together for a moment. Then, I reported to him that the people [members of the anti-Muslim organisation] (969)⁹ from here [surrounding area] said they would destroy or burn our religious school and our Muslim temple [mosque]. So I discussed about it with the Township leader. Then, he told me that he would come to call a meeting for us after two days but we, *Ka la*, were not invited to come to the meeting for the first time because the other people would see us in a different way. Even though we did not go to the meeting, people still criticised the Township leader [accused him of supporting Muslims] when the Buddhist monk came to preach here. In my life, I have never seen those who have bad attitudes [hate] towards other people. Now it happens like that. We were not happy about that. It also made a worse situation for us. It became a noise [commonly spoken in the village] that people should not buy things from *Ka la* [Muslim] shops. Most *Ka la* are poor people. Maybe you may see many *Ka la Malay* [young Muslim girls] who are street sellers in the street. During that whole year [after the 2013 riots], it became a serious concern because they [street sellers] were afraid to sell outside. If we go out for fishing, we worry that we will be beaten by other non-*Ka la* people because we are a minority ethnic group. That case [experience of discrimination] became very tough that year so the Township leader had to call a meeting two times. Then, it [discrimination] became silent. We can stay in peace here because of KNU's support. Without KNU's support, I could not imagine what would happen to us. The people from the upper land, C--- village, B--- village, and D--- village have never seen us in a negative way until now, but for the people who are from the other side [a different area] [they have a negative view] and I know about U Maung Gyi [a man from the different area who has a bad attitude towards Muslims]; they dislike *Ka la*. They never want to see us. We have been suffering brutally. We have a lot of examples to express our sufferings. As for me, I have been an elder person [who is responsible for the village] so that I can know more about KNU. Every year I have tried to help the village as much as I can. If the people wanted to build the school or something, we, *Ka la*, were called to participate in helping them. However, they did not call anyone [who was Muslim] to attend [village] meetings if something urgent came up. In my opinion, it is because of the village administrator's poor management. They put us away [did not involve us in community meetings] but they called us when they needed money. Even when we participated in the meetings they never took our suggestion and advice. They just did whatever they wanted to do. We just give money that they need [donate to the community] and then we have to stay in our houses [not invited to participate in meetings]. We do not know anything [information on what is happening in the village]. We have been discriminated against like that. They do not want to call us. They do not want to count us in.

⁷ The interviewee is giving an example of being influenced by villagers around him and does not suggest that the researcher actually signed the agreement.

⁸ In March 2013 a riot between Muslim and Buddhist ethnic groups in Mate Htee Lar [Meiktila], Mandalay Division left at least 40 people dead. See "[State of emergency declared in Burma after religious riot](#)," TIME, March 22nd, 2013.

⁹ 969 is a radical Buddhist organisation in Burma known to be strongly anti-Muslim.

So we will come back to the mountain case. Ok? I heard they [E--- village and other villages] will celebrate the traditional religious praying ceremony on the mountain on the 29th [of this month]. What do you think about that?

I was born here. I am a villager in this area. If they do like that [hold a traditional ceremony], we and they have the same heart. If they do not want to do, we also do not want to do. If they think it is good, we will think it is good because we all live in the same village and drink the same water. This is my attitude.

If you are invited to go to the traditional religious praying ceremony on the mountain, will you go there?

Of course, I will go because it is our village. We will definitely go if we are invited to go.

Are the Tatmadaw here still doing [demanding] forced labour?

No, now they do not do it anymore. They stopped doing forced labour 3 years ago. In the past, they asked people to buy things [supplies for Tatmadaw] outside [of their army camp]. It happened like that. 3 years ago, they stopped doing that.

Why did they stop doing [demanding] forced labour? What do you think about that?

They oppressed the villagers. They treated the villagers unfairly. We had to give them bamboo and trees for free in the past. They demanded bamboo from every village. The villagers had to give [their resources] without any complaint. Because of those kinds of unfair activities, the people [leaders] raised their voices [expressed their feelings] on the radio and TV. Later on, they [Tatmadaw] reduced that kind of forced labour. Finally, it disappeared in our area.

Which Tatmadaw army camp is near to your village [B--- village]?

It is Pein Nel Taw army camp. This is the only army camp which is very near to the village. It is also near to our Muslim temple [Mosque]. It is just one road's distance between the army camp and our temple.

Do you know which Battalion leads this army camp?

It is Battalion #44. Maybe, I am not sure. I just heard that.

Do you know who is the Camp Commander?

I do not know.

Does he [the Camp Commander] not call to see the people [make requests on the villagers]?

They [Camp Commanders] have changed from the previous Camp Commander recently. No, they do not call the people like before. Now they do not want anyone to see them. They just stay in their own places.

What do you want to say or give suggestions on regarding the human rights that we have talked about this afternoon?

As you know, many people are eager to talk about human rights. They have waited for a chance to talk about it. In my whole life, more than 50 years, I have never talked about human rights. Now I have the right to talk about it. I am very happy but the reality is [that this is] just the beginning [for getting human rights] as you told me. You or I do not get the light [the opportunity to talk about human rights during the 'dark' times of oppression]. We all want to see the light. We want to get benefits from the reality [of starting to talk openly about human rights] that is happening. In the past, sometimes we wanted to say [about human rights] but we could not say [anything]. We worried that somebody [soldier] would take us [risk their security]. We were afraid of many things. Now we all already know that we do not need to feel afraid anymore. So now a lot of people want to talk about it [human rights]. I have been suffering for more than 50 years. I feel like my suffering will disappear in the future. Sometimes it happened like we talk

about human rights and then it [suffering] disappears. Some people think it is not special even though they talk about it. Actually, it happened in the past [people saying human rights are not special] but not now. Now we have the rights to talk but also we have to get benefits from the reality.

Can you give me advice or tell me if you see me next time when something important comes out?

Yes. I can.

Thank you so much for your time and answers.

You are welcome.

KHRG is one of the human rights groups. They thank you too.

Yes. I am very happy to know about KHRG because we have been oppressed for a long time and now we can talk about human rights. Even though we do not get it at all [full human rights], we can feel it.

Ok thank you.

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

- “Thaton Interview: Naw C—, June 2015,” (October 2016)
- “Ongoing militarisation in southeast Myanmar,” (October 2016)
- “Thaton Field Report: January to December 2015,” (August 2016)
- Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women’s testimonies from southeast Myanmar, (August 2016)
- “Thaton Situation Update: Thaton Township, July to October 2015,” (April 2016)

Doo Tha Htoo (Karen)



KHRG Karen Human Rights Group
 Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma