



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

November 21, 2016 / KHRG #16-84-A1-I1

Toungoo Interview: Saw A---, October 2016

This Interview with Saw A--- describes the situation in Htaw Ta Htoo (Htantabin) Township, Toungoo District, in October 2016, including education, healthcare, NCA (Nation Wide Ceasefire) impact and IDP (Internally Displaced Person) return.

- *Saw A---, who is an IDP, describes his perspectives on the return of IDPs in Toungoo district and the marginal problems that he would face when he goes back to B--- village where he originally came from.*
- *Saw A--- also stated about how the new NLD (National League for Democracy) government's education department is sending teachers to Karen areas controlled by the country government, and that he thinks these government teachers are extinguishing the Karen written language, culture and history.*

Interview | Saw A---, (male, 41), B--- village, Htantabin Township, Toungoo District (October 2016)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Hpapun District on October 12th 2016 and is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹ This interview was conducted in Hpapun District with an interviewee who is an IDP originally from Toungoo District. This interview was received along with other information from Hpapun District, including 6 other interviews and 62 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: -

Position: Head person of education administration [at Ei Tu Hta IDP camp]

What is your name?

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.

My name is Saw A---.

Your age?

I am 41 years old.

How about your village?

I was born in B--- village, Khoh Hkee village tract, Htao Ta Htoo [Htantabin] Township, Taw Oo [Toungoo] District.

So now you live here [in Ei Tu Hta IDP camp]?

Yes, as a displaced person.

Do you have any position in the camp?

Ever since I arrived in the camp, I have worked as a person in charge of education [administration].

Up until now?

Yes.

Is your nationality Karen?

Yes, Karen.

How about your religion?

I am a Baptist.

Are you married?

Yes.

[Do you have] Female [or male children]?

Two male and two female.

How old is the oldest one?

My oldest daughter is 17 years old.

How about the youngest one?

Over three years old.

Related to the return [of IDPs], what information have you had about the return process?

In 2014, we received the information.

By [who]?

By KCBOs [Karen Community Based Organisations] that stand in the middle [between the IDPs and The Border Consortium TBC]. They notified us about how the food rations will be stopped and, for us, we have to go back to our place [village] as they have planned.

What do you think of the return?

My opinion on this return is: actually, we are willing to go back to our land where we were born but now we look at the political situation; it causes a big doubt. And if we look at the political transition after the Thein Sein government, and in the recent past, another government took over power. And last month, they [Burma/Myanmar government] did the 21st Pin Lon [Panglong]³ peace conference. And if we look at [the situation] after the big meeting [Panglong peace conference], the fighting increased in ethnic areas.⁴ Especially in Kachin state, southern Shan State as well as in Karen state, and the IDPs are increasing [because of this fighting]⁵ so that for us if we look at returning [leaving Ei Tu Hta IDP camp], we are having big doubts because of the unstable political situation. It is a concern for us.

What do you think is the greatest concern that you would have if you go back?

For us the greatest concern is security. And if we look at the NCA [Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement]⁶ between the country government and the KNU [Karen National Union], it doesn't please us so our opinion and [what] we think is [that] maybe, if fighting happens again we would face a worse situation than in the past that we faced.

In your personal opinion, do you support the return process? If you do please elaborate why and if not, elaborate why not?

Related to this repatriation, in my opinion, if we look at one side I think, we should support, and if we look at the other side based on the situations around it [in Burma/Myanmar], it is not strong enough to support this process.

When you go back what would your basic needs be?

When I arrive [back at the place where he originally fled from], the most important thing we civilians would need is security and second and other things are food, education, healthcare and multiple kinds of social services. The most important things that we would need are security, food and other things.

How do you think the Burma/Myanmar government should support you in this time of return? Could be anything [that you expect from the country government].

³ The 21st Century Panglong Conference was held on August 31st 2016 in Nay Pyi Taw. It marked a crucial step in negotiations between the Burma/Myanmar government and ethnic groups towards an agreement for peace and national reconciliation. It followed from the historic first Panglong Conference, in 1947, in which Burma established its independence from Britain. See "[Myanmar's Suu Kyi kicks off peace conference with appeal for unity](#)," Reuters, August 31st 2016.

⁴ Sporadic fighting in 2016 has been ongoing in ethnic areas although this is not thought to be a direct result of the Panglong Conference.

⁵ See, for example, "[More than 3,000 villagers flee escalating conflict in Karen State](#)," September 12th 2016, The Irrawaddy.

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, 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.

In my opinion, now I am not going back [returning] with the Burma/Myanmar government's plan. If I go back, I would go back with UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] and KCBOs' plan because I know that if I go back with the Burma/Myanmar government's plan straight [with only their plan], it will benefit the Burma/Myanmar government a lot. So currently, according to KNU and [Karen] districts who have authorities, they have plans for us [to help], I think that I don't need the Burma/Myanmar government's support. I would need support from our mother organisation KNU and from CBOs by their cooperation and work.

By support I mean from many ways such as improving healthcare services and removing army camps in order to solve the security problems [that you mentioned above].

If it is like that, [with] support from the Burma/Myanmar government's side what we would mainly need is [for them] to remove their army camps in our areas and the camps that are situated close to our villages because they are causing concerns for our/us civilians to go back. And after removing their camps, we are not only happy with removing their camps; we also know that there are landmines that they planted near their army camps, we also want them to clear them [landmines] all.

Services such as healthcare or education etc, are there any services from the Burma/Myanmar government that you trust?

If we look at the new government's work plan that they have for the ethnic groups, if they do it as they planned before they [NLD] become the government, we trust them based on many ways [situations]. But if we look at the past, over the six months since they became the government, the promises that had with the ethnic minorities, nothing happened so [because of] that, there is nothing that I would trust them deeply [about]. In addition, if we look at the recent education [situation], as I am an education worker, we do not trust them at all because if we look some places [in Karen State] that are in country [Burma/Myanmar] government controlled areas, they set up their schools. They send their teachers along with their curriculum to our Karen schools; they extinguish our Karen written language and as we are unable to learn our language, culture and our [Karen] history, I am not supporting their plan [system] of education.

Do you know anything in advance about the return plan relating to the available choices [for IDPs who return]?

What kind of options?

If you go back, you will be supported like this and for those who choose to stay, will there be support for them etc..?

For the repatriation, the information that we received so far is: for us IDPs, if we arrive at our place [village], there will be food support for 12 months for us or less than that, it will not be more than 12 months. For education, healthcare and other needs, I think it will be supported by the UNHCR's departments [partner NGOs] that are related to social needs. For those who stay [in Ei Tu Hta IDP camp], the support will be stopped by September 2017 and there will no longer be support in the future for them. There will be only be vocational training such as agriculture and animal husbandry in [preparing] other ways for rehabilitation. For food, it [support], it will end by September 2017.

So they [IDPs] have choices: go back or stay and if they stay, future support is unsure for those who stay. So two choices basically?

Yes.

How do you feel about leaving this place [Ei Tu Hta IDP camp]?

It is as human nature [as you would expect]. As we have been living here for a long time, we have our homes and our own community as it is supposed to be, according to our situation [as IDPs]. So now if the time comes for us to leave, it is depressing for us as we have to be leaving our [current] place, [and] have to start a new life; it is just like restarting a life. For example; we have passed A and B already. If we go back, we will have to be starting from A again. And I feel like it is a big problem for me. In addition, in our social relationships in the Karen community, we have been working together for many years and many months. If we go back, it causes problems as human nature [as you would expect]; it is problematic for me.

How long have you lived in the camp?

Starting from May 11, 2016.⁷

Do you know where you will be going and the situation of the place that you will be going back to?

For me as I am from Taw Oo [Toungoo], there is no special place for us that has been planned [for return]. There is only going back to the village that we originally come from. And now my village, according to what I knew, there are no big business operations in the place where I am from. There is only hill farming and agriculture and we are not able to work freely because it is situated near the Burma government Tatmadaw camp.

Do you have land in the place you fled from before?

I can say that I do not have land because the place where I was based, my home place after I got married, I was displaced [from that place] to a Karenni [refugee] camp and now I have moved here [Ei Tu Hta camp]. I can say that the lands that I used to have are gone.

Do you have any information about services such as healthcare and education at the place where you will return to?

No, I don't. To get work for our livelihoods, there is none I think. We will have to struggle, the same as people there [at the place they return], with difficulty.

Has the discussion been held with the people [IDPs] here?

There was discussion last year already, because of the uncertainty of sending back people, the survey was not confirmed [no final result was given]. Now, as we have known, there will be discussion with civilians [IDPs] when they [authorities responsible for IDP return] carry out a survey among the civilians [IDPs].

So then, they will be collecting the civilians' perspectives and confirm [what will happen]?

Yes.

Ok, are there any questions that you want to mention that I missed from my questions?

From the questions that you missed to ask that I want to mention is, there is one main thing; in our country, there is ceasefire between the country government and ethnic armed groups. They signed the ceasefire agreement. It is not a question. I just want to mention that many people will know [the situation] and give pressure in many ways to the Burma government in order to [pressure them to] remove their army camps along with their soldiers in our Karen areas so that us IDPs we will be able to go back and work freely [in our areas].

⁷ Saw A---was in a Karenni refugee camp for an unspecified amount of time before moving to Ei Tu Tha IDP camp.

If I use this information for publication, would you be OK?

For the information that I shared, I fully give permission for publication anywhere.

Thank you very much.

Thanks.

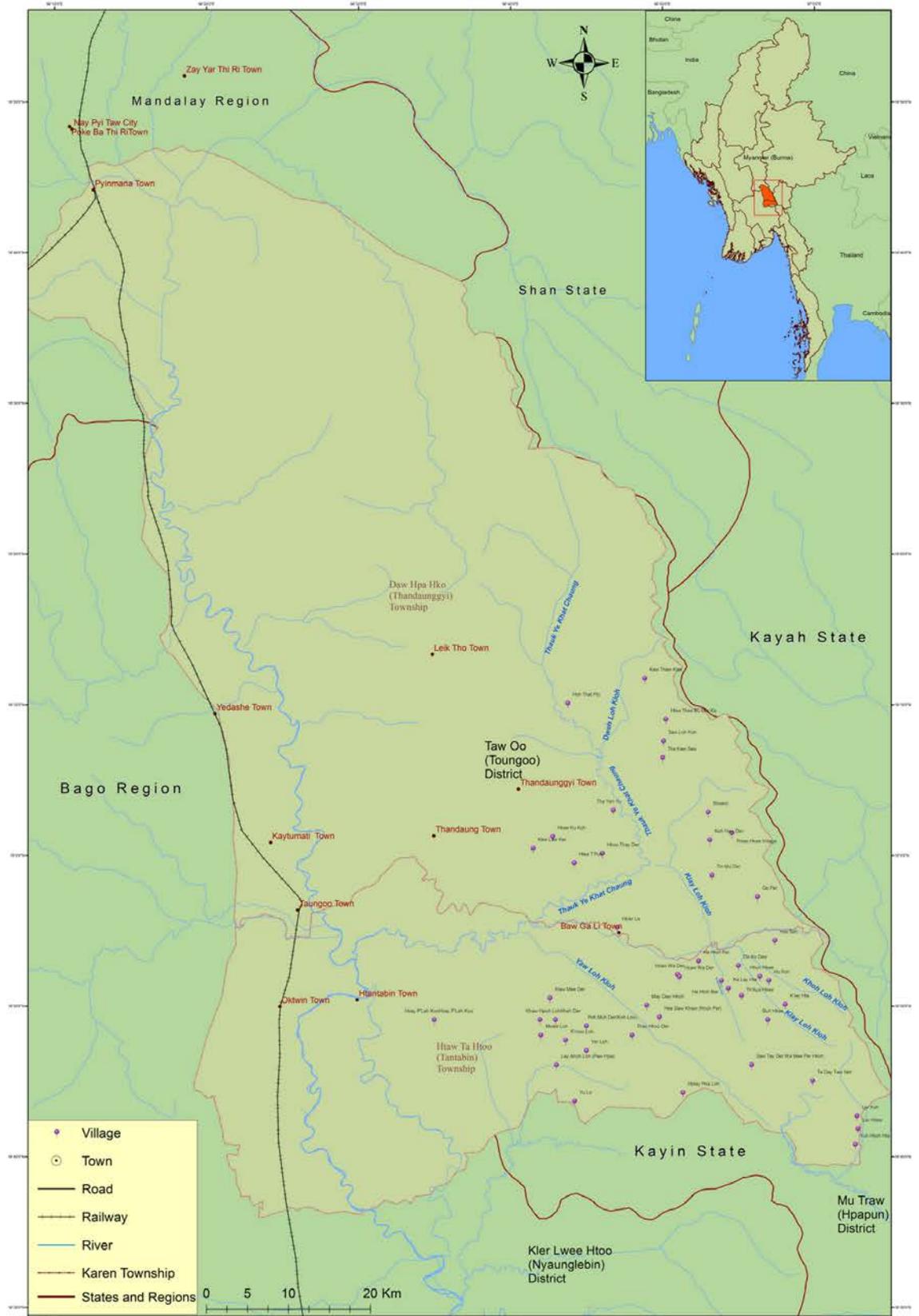


This photo was taken by a KHRG researcher in Ei Tu Hta IDPs camp in Hpapun District on October 12th 2016. The photo shows Saw A--- who was representing as the temporary IDPs' camp commander during a survey planning meeting known as a "Go and See" workshop. He was interviewed by a KHRG researcher about his perspectives on returning to his home land and the information that has been given to IDPs about their proposed return. *[Photo: KHRG]*

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

- "Toungoo Interview: Ma A---, April 2016," (October 2016)
- "Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women's testimonies from southeast Myanmar" (August 2016)
- "Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi and Htantabin townships, July to September 2015," (July 2016)
- "Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi Township, March to July 2015," (March 2016)
- "Toungoo Field Report: December 2013 to December 2014," (February 2016)

Taw Oo (Toungoo) District



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