



News Bulletin

July 26, 2017 / KHRG #17-1-NB1

Three separate killing incidents based on witchcraft suspicion in Hpa-an District

This News Bulletin describes three separate killing incidents, where five people in total were killed based on witchcraft suspicion, in Hpa-an District in Paingkyon Township, between April and September 2016.

- *On April 9th 2016, at night time, Naw A---'s husband was arbitrarily arrested and killed by a group of villagers when he and his youngest son returned home from watching a movie at another villager's house in B--- village, Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District.*
 - *In August 2016, a husband and wife of G--- village were shot and killed in two separated locations at the same night at 9 PM in G--- village.*
 - *In September 2016 at 3 AM in the morning, Naw L---'s family was attacked by a group of people with armes leading to the shooting and killing of Naw L---'s mother, Ma P---, 87 years old, and her brother Maung N---, 48 years old in M--- village. The raiders also robbed 3,500,000 kyat [US\$2567.81] and precious properties that belonged to Naw L---'s family.*
 - *All three killing cases were committed by villagers who claimed that the murdered people were practicing witchcraft. In some cases, perpetrators were linked to an armed group.¹*
-

Incident #1

On September 25th 2016, a KHRG community member met and interviewed a 40 year old female B--- villager, named Naw A---, who reported about how her husband was killed by a group of villagers because villagers suspected him of practicing witchcraft.

Naw A--- reported to a KHRG community member that on April 9th 2016, at night time, her husband Saw C--- was arrested and killed by a group of villagers when he and his youngest son were returning home from watching a movie at another villager's house in B--- village, Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District.²

¹ This News Bulletin was written by KHRG office staff and is based on information from a community member from Hpa-an District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It summarises information from three interviews received by KHRG in November 2016. 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.

² For the full interview with Naw A, see, "[Hpa-an Interview: Naw A---, September 2016](#)," KHRG, July 2017.

On the night when Naw A---'s husband was killed, she followed the group of villagers who dragged her husband away and tried to kill him. She begged these villagers to release him and not to kill him but they did not listen to her. They suffocated, beat and killed Naw A---'s husband with the wooden sticks. Naw A--- told a KHRG community member that,

“That night, my son and my husband were watching a movie at Pu J---'s house. [I was told that] someone asked them to turn off the video, so the children in the house did it. After, he told our son, “Son!! Let’s go home because people will not let us keep the television [movie] on anymore”. Regarding what people told me about my husband, it is likely he did not know anything [about people’s plans to kill him], so he [and our son] came back [home]. My son said people arrested him [his father] when they [he and our son] arrived beside Uncle Saw K---’s water well. I ran to my son when I heard him crying because I thought he was bit by a dog. Before I reached my son, I heard my husband scream for me to come help him, “Naw Moe! Help me, Naw Moe! Help me!” I went out with a torch light, so I could see, and I saw people strangling his neck and squeezing his nose [suffocating him]. Therefore, I rushed to those people [who were killing my husband]. Then my younger brother tried to stop me, but I was still able to reach two of the killers who were holding my husband and pushed them away. I could not see those killers’ faces. I only saw their hands [restraining my husband]. Then some other people stopped me and others caught him [my husband] and then they separated him from me, and they did not let us see each other anymore. [...] They took him away and killed him. [Before he was murdered] I begged my younger brother to let me see him again. When I went there [to where they were holding him], I could only see the killers’ legs and could not see their faces because they were hidden behind a walking tractor, so I did not know who [the killers] were.”

According to Naw A---, the villagers who killed her husband did so because they suspected that he had buried cursed items including red seeds, cremation charcoal, a voodoo doll and/or stones with curses on them under other villagers’ houses. After her husband was killed, other villagers also told her that her husband used to tell them that he was immune to arrest and killing because he could do witchcraft. She was also told by villagers that he had killed almost a hundred of people in his original village with his witchcraft skills. Villagers who had argued with her husband prior to her husband’s murder further told her that her husband could do witchcraft and when social conflict occurred in the village they suspected that her husband did it with his witchcraft skills.

Regarding these suspicious, she stated that,

“I had never heard about this [accusations that my husband made their family argue with each other] before. I only heard it after my husband was killed. They [gossipers] said they did not dare to talk to me about it frankly when my husband [was] alive. I replied to them, “Why did you not say this to his wife [me] when he was still alive, and you could still come and tell me? If you told me, I would have told my husband and taught him moral values and what is right and wrong.” They said, “We did not dare to talk about it because we were afraid that this information [witchcraft] would spread [to the authorities].” However, they dared to do it [kill my husband] in secret. They said they did it openly, and everyone knew it [but I did not know who killed my husband].”

Naw A--- also asked her nephew and niece, who had been raised by her husband, if they had any suspicions about him practising witchcraft, and they had replied to her that they had never seen their uncle practice witchcraft or kill anyone in the village. Furthermore, when Naw A--- asked her husband’s relatives to confirm if he could do witchcraft for sure they responded that, *“Our uncle had looked after cows since he was a child until we grew up. People even asked him to blow and start a fire, but he could not do it well, so how could he do witchcraft? Therefore, we do not believe it. Why did they [people who accused our uncle] not inform his siblings to come [to the village] before they killed him? If they told us in advance, we would*

have come and spoken on his behalf. Even if we had to sign an agreement, we could do that too.”

Naw A--- and her husband usually went back and visited her husband’s relatives in D--- village, which is her husband’s original village, once or twice per year. She reported that many villagers in her husband’s original village also do not believe that her husband could practice witchcraft. They confirmed that their uncle had not killed anyone, which was part of the witchcraft rumour against her deceased husband. Naw A--- said that in her village she also heard a rumour after her husband was killed that people suspected that her husband had also taught her witchcraft when he had been alive. Moreover, she fears that her entire family is now a target to be killed if information spreads in the community about her husband being killed because of suspected witchcraft. Naw A--- stated that,

“People said, *“He could do witchcraft, so his wife can do it too. Her husband would have taught her [how to do witchcraft].”* They spoke in secret and said if anything happens [in court] and if I report this [that they killed my husband] to someone [the authorities], then they would kill all [of my family members], and they would not leave anyone left.” Naw A--- still does not know and has not been told where her husband’s body has been left. Furthermore, after her husband was killed, she has faced livelihood difficulties because she had always relied on him for the family’s livelihood, as he had worked on a plantation to provide money for them. Naw A--- now has to work on the plantation on her own which she finds difficult because she says she has a lack of understanding and skill relating to plantation work. Naw A--- is left with livelihood pressures to support her two youngest children who stay with her, whilst her eldest son has migrated for work in Bangkok, Thailand.

In October 2016, local authorities including the KNU, held a meeting with Naw A--- and relevant villagers and discussed the case. It was decided that no action should be taken as it might cause further trouble and harm to the remaining victim’s family members.

According to a KHRG community member, when the case reached the KNU’s Paingkyon Township office, the KNU’s township administrator along with other KNU officials went to the area and held a meeting with village leaders, Naw A---, the victim’s older brother and relatives, and villagers including perpetrators. In the meeting, villagers admitted that they were all included in the plan and killing of Naw A---’s husband. After some discussion, all villagers agreed that they would provide financial support for Naw A---’s husband’s funeral, help build a house for Naw A--- and her children, and support two of Naw A---’s younger sons, the youngest who is currently five years old, in their education until they are 18 years old. As many villagers were involved in the murder, the KNU decided it could not take criminal action against all perpetrators. However, in the meeting Paingkyon Township’s KNU administrator asked all villagers who were present to sign an agreement that stated that villagers must not commit any [further] crimes against people said to be practising witchcraft, and this agreement is to be kept at the township office. The victims’ family members and relatives agreed with the decision that KNU officials had made for them.



This photo was taken on September 25th 2016 in E--- village, Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District. The photo shows Naw A---, she is 40 years old, lives in B--- village, Taw Soe village tract, Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District. Naw A--- met with a KHRG researcher in E--- village, Pee T'Hka village tract. Naw A--- reported that her husband was murdered by a group of villagers who suspected that her husband could do witchcraft and blamed him for conflict which happened among villagers [Photo: KHRG]

Incident #2

On September 18th 2016, in a separate incident, a KHRG community member met with a female health worker and interviewed her about a killing case that had happened in August 2016 in G--- village, T'Moh Klo village tract, Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District.

In August 2016, a husband and wife in G--- village were shot and killed in two separate locations on the same night, at 9 PM in G--- village. The husband was shot and killed at his farm hut, whilst at the same time his wife was taken from her house and was shot and killed in front of the village primary school. Both husband and wife were killed by machine gun. According to the villagers, the couple was suspected of practicing witchcraft. It is believed they were killed by Border Guard Force (BGF)'s soldiers under General Hpah Nwee's command, also known as Hpuh Hpah Nwee. Less than one year prior to the incident, the couple and their family members had been asked to drink promissory water at BGF's General Hpah Nwee's place and the couple had been told by General Hpah Nwee not to practice witchcraft anymore. However, the couple was killed less than a year after they drank promissory water.

According to local sources, the people who killed the couple asked the G--- village head to bury the dead bodies. The perpetrators also told the victims' remaining family members, victims' relatives and other villagers not to report the killing case and threatened to kill all family members if they report the case and if news of the killing case were to spread.

Following the threats, the affected villagers felt afraid and were unwilling to report the killing case to authorities. The female victim's mother stated that,

"I have been in fear since people killed my daughter and my son-in-law. [...] We were really afraid because people told us that they would kill all of us [relatives] if [information about] this case spreads and if other people know about it, or if they know for sure that people reported about this incident."

"I did not really see it [the incident]. Villagers wanted to tell us [what happened] but they were afraid that people [involved in the murders] would kill all of their relatives if this [information on the] case spreads. Therefore they could not tell us openly. [...] But an aunty [elderly lady] said that, after the killers committed the killings, they ordered the relatives who remained that they should lose [forget about] this killing case here and if [information on] this case were to come out, it would be because of one of the relatives here. If this happened, they would do [kill] all of the relatives."

However, G--- villagers reported that a witchcraft case had never happened before in the village. According to the female victim's mother, she had heard a rumour about her daughter

practicing witchcraft so she had asked her daughter directly if that rumour was true. Her daughter had responded to her that,

“Mom, how can I do that [witchcraft]? I have never planned to do anything bad to anybody. Even when my children were sick I could not even make a piece of spirit thread and a rice ball [according to traditional practice to heal them] for them. I have to call other people to do it for me, so I clearly am not able to do anything bad [with witchcraft] to other people.”

A friend of the female victim also reported that, *“My friend was an honest woman. She worked patiently as a daily labourer and then she used the money that she earned to offer donations to the monastery, and support her children to go to school. She got money only from her daily labour work. That’s all I understand.”*

The husband and wife who were killed had three children; the eldest child migrated to work in Thailand, the middle child stays in a monastery in town and the youngest child who is five years old stayed with them to attend school. As of September 2016, the two older children were not informed that their parents had been killed, whilst the youngest child was in the care of her 75 year old grandmother who cannot work for her living, and other family members stay nearby to provide additional help.

Furthermore, as the woman was shot and killed directly outside the village school, at the time of reporting, teachers and students did not feel safe to teach and study at school anymore. Instead, they were teaching from a villager’s house.

There has been no action from authorities for this case as the family report that they are fearful to report it to authorities.

Incident #3

On October 3rd 2016, in a separate incident, a KHRG community member met and interviewed a 43 year old woman named Naw L--- in M--- village, Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District. Naw L--- reported to a KHRG community member about the killing incident of her mother and her brother during a robbery that happened in September 2016, both of whom were accused by local people of practising witchcraft.

Naw L--- reported that in September 2016 at 3 AM in the morning, a group of people came to her house and shouted that they would kill the whole family in the house, and started shooting. Naw L---’s mother was shot dead in the bedroom; Naw L---’s brother was shot three times and was killed as he fled outside, and Naw L--- was hacked with an axe on her head in her bedroom but survived the attack. Describing the attack, Naw L--- recalled,

“The killers took my axe and my knife. They hacked my head with the axe that I used to cut firewood [...].

How many times did they fire the gun?

I heard [the gun] two times in the house. I was shocked when I heard it so I did not hear the sound of the gun [fire again] when they shot my mother. They shot my brother on the ground floor [outside the house] three times.”

Naw L--- mother's name was Ma P---, she was 87 years old. Her brother's name was Maung N---, he was 48 years old. The group of people who raided the house and killed them reportedly included KNU-KNLA PC³ soldiers.

Two villagers named Neh Pyu, a cousin of Naw L--- who lives in Taw Plaw village, and Nya Lee, who lives in Pah Meh village and is a soldier of KNU-KNLA PC, had publicly stated that Naw L---'s mother was practicing witchcraft. Prior to the incident Nya Lee had previously traded precious stones but he had lost profit so he migrated for work in Thailand. Naw L--- stated that she suspects that Nya Lee is the one who is responsible for organising the murder of her mother and brother. According to Naw L---, there was no issue about her mother being suspected of witchcraft before Nya Lee returned in the village. When Nya Lee returned to the village, he had spread the rumour that Naw L---'s mother had witchcraft skills, then he sold his land and with the profit, bought a gun and, reportedly, killed Naw L---'s mother. Naw L--- stated,

“People said my mother and my brother were practicing witchcraft. They said my mother had a stone which was possessed by a spirit, and that my brother went to the ground floor of other people's houses [to practice witchcraft]. People who said my mother had a stone which was possessed by a spirit called us to my cousin T---'s house and questioned me. I replied to them we did not have it [the possessed stone], and if we had to drink promissory water we would drink it in the village, but they did not do it [make us drink it]. Three traditional healers said it was my mother alone who did it [brought evil spirits] to all of the villagers' children who got such illness and high temperatures that their children were delirious.”

According to Naw L---, prior to the incident, she went to Thaton Town in April 2016 to check with a Burmese-speaking spirit healer (shaman) about the witchcraft allegations, by asking the healer whether her mother had witchcraft skills or not. The spirit healer checked and told Naw L--- that her grandparents had been able to do witchcraft, and that they had passed this skill to Naw L---'s mother before they had died. Following this, Naw L--- returned to her village and her mother, her brother and herself went to another spirit healer in S--- village to rid themselves of the witchcraft that they were suspected of. The spirit healer did not see any evil spirits in Naw L--- and her mother, but the fortune teller explained that Naw L---'s brother had taken a ball of thread from dead people [their bodies] and, because of this, the evil spirit was close to him. Therefore, the spirit healer asked them to stay for three days for the treatment before returning back to their village. Before Naw L--- returned to her village, she requested the spirit healer to go to her house and check around their compound for any evil spirits, and to check if anyone had buried anything evil (items that had been cursed/possessed) under their house.

Sometime after Naw L--- returned to her village, the spirit healer phoned Naw L--- and asked her to invite her village leaders to her house, and told her that he would come there and solve the issue of the evil spirits. According to Naw L---, when the spirit healer came to her house to take away the evil spirits, some villagers were not satisfied with the action, and they continued to accuse Naw L---'s mother of having witchcraft skills and of having a stone possessed by evil spirits, although Naw L--- asked the spirit healer to check the gem stones that they owned, and he stated that they were good stones, not cursed. Following this however, the spirit healer asked Naw L---, Naw L---'s mother and Naw L---'s brother to drink promissory water in front of village leaders, villagers and the Paingkyon Township KNU's official to prove that Naw L---'s family were not practicing witchcraft. According to local belief, upon drinking the promissory

³ The KNU/KNLA Peace Council (also called the Karen Peace Council or KPC), is an armed group based in Htoh Kaw Koh, Hpa-an District, which split from the Karen National Union (KNU) and signed a ceasefire agreement with the SPDC government in 2007. The KNU/KNLA-PC subsequently refused to comply with orders from the then-SPDC government to transform into a Tatmadaw Border Guard Force in 2010. The KNU/KNLA-PC signed a preliminary ceasefire agreement with the Burma/Myanmar government on February 7th 2012, and the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) on October 15th 2015.

water, if any of the family members were practicing witchcraft they would experience bad effects or die brutally.

Later on, Naw L---, her mother and her brother were asked by the local village leaders to drink promissory water again at the local monastery. Naw L--- said,

“They called three of us to the monastery to drink promissory [water]. If we did any bad things, the promissory water would kill us, three days after we drank it. Before we drank it, we had to curse [promise] to ourselves, saying three times ‘If I plan to do anything bad to other people, may I die after drinking this water’.”

Nothing happened to Naw L---’s family after they had drunk the promissory water until the night of the attack on their family home. According to Naw L---, the group which shot and killed her mother and brother also took 3,500,000 kyat [US\$2567.81⁴] from her house, and stole additional precious gold items which were four rings, four necklaces, one pendant, one hair clip, a golden comb, a golden bangle, and a dozen golden buttons. Naw L--- did not know the value of the gold that the group stole because she had never weighed the gold.

In the morning after the robbery and killing of Naw L---’s mother and brother, the Myanmar police came to the village and went to the incident place, Naw L---’s house, and examined the crime scene. The police asked Naw L--- many questions about the incident. Due to the injury that Naw L--- sustained on her head from the axe attack, Naw L--- was then sent to Paingkyon hospital and then to Hlaingbwe hospital. However, neither of the two hospitals accepted her for treatment, as they were not equipped with an X-ray machine and deemed her injury as too serious. Finally, Myanmar police sent her to Hpa-an Hospital where she received treatment. However, despite her serious head injury, Naw L--- stayed at Hpa-an Hospital for only one day before requesting permission to return to her home village in order to attend her mother’s funeral service, and to receive treatment at a local hospital in her village area.

Eventually, according to Naw L---, the perpetrators who robbed her family and murdered her mother and brother were arrested by the Myanmar police and detained in jail in Taung Ka Lay jail, Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District. The people who were arrested and detained by the Myanmar police are four males: Nya Lee, Poe T’Thay, Poe T’Thay’s son and one other man who Naw L--- could not identify. These four people are members of Karen Peace Council (also known as the KNLA/KNU-PC) from Battalion #773. According to Naw L---, Myanmar police came to her house with the suspects to discuss the crime scene with them and gather evidence for the conviction. When they came, Naw L--- cooked food for the suspects. One of the suspects told her that he had chosen not to kill her because he had already taken all her money and jewellery. The suspect told her,

“I hit your head with an axe. Then I saw and took all of your money and jewellery, so I did not kill you. People had ordered me to kill all of you [in the house] and although I knew that you had not died yet, I did not do it [kill you]. When I went back to them [the people who ordered the killing], they asked me ‘Are they all dead?’ I replied ‘Yes, they are all dead’. Actually, I lied to them.”

Naw L--- did not remember the exact incident date, but she told a KHRG community member that the incident had happened less than a month before her meeting with KHRG community member on October 3rd 2016. According to the local source, as of March 2017, Paingkyon Township KNU’s leaders held the meeting with village tract leaders and Naw L--- in order to address a complaint raised locally that village tract leaders had been involved in the decision to kill the two family members. During the meeting, village tract leaders denied the accusation

⁴ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 7th July 2017 official market rate of 1363 kyat to US \$1.

that they had been involved, and reported that they had not been aware of the plan to commit this crime. Additionally, Naw L--- reported that the Myanmar police had found all of the property stolen from her and had promised to return it, but Naw L--- had not received any back yet.



These photos were taken on October 3rd 2016 in R--- village, K'Kyoh village tract, Paingkyon Township, Hpa-an District. The photo shows Naw L---, who was hacked on her head by an axe when a group of people attacked her family at 3 AM in the morning in their family home. Naw L--- received stitches to her head for her injury. Naw L---'s mother and brother were shot and killed during the attack and the suspects also took 3,500,000 kyat [US\$2567.81] and other precious items including golden necklaces and rings that belonged to Naw L---'s mother. Naw L--- reported that her mother and brother were rumoured to have witchcraft skills and she thinks the murders were organised by some local people including KNU/KNLA-PC soldiers because of this. [Photos: KHRG].

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

- "Hpa-an Interview: Naw A---, September 2016," (July 2017)
 - "Hpa-an Short Update: Hlaingbwe Township, March to October 2016," (April 2017)
 - "Hpa-an Interview: Saw A--- and Saw B---, October 2016," (February 2017)
 - "Recent fighting between newly-reformed DKBA and joint forces of BGF and Tatmadaw soldiers led more than six thousand Karen villagers to flee in Hpa-an District, September 2016," (December 2016)
 - "Hpa-an Interview: Saw A---, August 2015," (October 2016)
-

Hpa-an District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)