



Interview

June 8, 2018 / KHRG #17-131-A4-I1

Hlaingbwe Interview: Saw Z---, November 2017

This Interview with Saw Z--- describes events occurring in Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District, during the period between October and November 2017, including information about military activities, instances of forced labour, health and livelihoods.

- *In the second week of October 2017, fighting broke out between the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) splinter group and the joint forces of the Border Guard Force (BGF) and the Tatmadaw in Hlaingbwe Township.*
- *The BGF led by Non-commissioned Officer (NCO) Maung Na forced villagers to serve as porters and guides between October and November 2017. The villagers were from Y--- village, T'Kwee Klah village tract, in Hlaingbwe Township. This was very dangerous for the villagers due to the presence of landmines in the area and the risk of DKBA splinter group attacking.*
- *Saw Z--- reported that the BGF, DKBA splinter group and Tatmadaw abused their power by intimidating villagers and perpetrating forced military labour throughout the skirmishes that occurred between October and November 2017. Consequently, some villagers faced food shortages and health challenges because they did not have any time to secure their livelihoods.*

Interview | Saw Z---, (male, age censored for security), Y--- village, T'Kwee Kla village tract, Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District (November 2017)

The following interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Hpa-an District on November 22, 2017 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 Hpa-an District, including three other interviews and 23 photographers.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

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.

Occupation: Farmer
Position: Villager

Good morning Kyaw.³ What is your name?

My name is Saw Z---

What is your marital status?

I am married.

How many children do you have?

I have three children: one daughter and two sons.

How old is your oldest child?

My oldest child is eight years old.

What is your ethnicity?

I am Karen.

What is your job?

I am a farmer.

What responsibility do you take in your village?

I am a villager whose responsibility it is to cooperate with the village head [when any issues happen in the village arise that I can help with].

Are there any human rights abuses happening in your village? If yes, please explain.

Yes, in the past [before November 22, 2017], Ko Per Baw⁴ [the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army splinter group]⁵ oppressed villagers and accused village leaders of being biased towards



This photo was taken on November 22nd 2017 in Y--- village, T’Kwee Kla village tract, Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District. The photo shows Saw Z---, who served as a BFG navigator during the period between October and November 2017. During his interview with KHRG on November 22nd 2017, he discussed his experience of being forced by BGF Non-commissioned Officer (NCO) Maung Na to serve as a navigator for almost two months. [Photo: KHRG]

³ *Kyaw* is a Karen term meaning ‘older brother.’ Although it is translated as ‘older brother’ it does not necessarily imply a familial relationship.

⁴ The Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, often referred as "Ko Per Baw" translated directly from Karen language as “yellow headscarves,” a reference to the DKBA’s uniform.

⁵ This is referring to the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) that was re-formed on January 16th 2016 as a splinter group from the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (2010 – present), and is also referred to as Na Ma Kya (‘Deaf Ear’). During fighting between the Tatmadaw and DKBA Benevolent throughout 2015, there was internal disagreement within the DKBA Benevolent which resulted in a number of commanders being dismissed in July 2015. These former commanders then issued a statement in January 2016 declaring the formation of a new splinter group. This organisation has phrased the formation of this group as the revival of the original Democratic Karen Buddhist Army which was formed in 1994 until it was broken up in 2010 into the BGF and the still-active DKBA Benevolent. The group is led by General Saw Kyaw Thet, Chief of Staff and General Saw Taing Shwe aka Bo Bi, Vice Chief of Staff. Other lower ranking commanders in the DKBA Buddhist splinter group are San Aung and late Kyaw Moh aka Na Ma Kya (reportedly killed on August 26th 2016). The group is currently based in Myaing Gyi Ngu area in Hlaing Bwe Township, Karen State. This DKBA Buddhist (2016 – present) should not be confused with the DKBA Benevolent (2010 – present) from which it broke away in January 2016, or with the original DKBA (1994 – 2010) which was broken up in 2010 into the BGF and the DKBA Benevolent. Importantly, the DKBA

the Tatmadaw⁶ and Border Guard Force [BGF]⁷ and of not supporting them [DKBA splinter group]. I said to them, “*We are not like that [not biased]. Since I am a native [Y---] villager and the village leaders were born in other villages [but currently live in Y--- village] I have the responsibility to guard them and I respect them as my parents.*” They [DKBA splinter group] became angry with me and fired a gun next to me [to frighten village leaders].

Who fired the gun?

DKBA soldier Paw Leh.

Who is his [battalion] commander?

His commander [DKBA splinter group Second Commander-in-Chief] is Bo Bi.⁸

Why did he fire the gun? Did you do anything wrong against them [the DKBA splinter group]?

No, I did not do anything against them. Whenever they ordered alcohol and food from us [villagers] we always gave them whatever they ordered. Ultimately, in March 2018 they oppressed and accused us [of being biased]. We disagreed with their accusations but they did not believe us. We could not do anything [to convince them otherwise], so we had to follow whatever they accused us of, and obey their orders. We are civilians so we do not have guns [to protect ourselves] and we were worried that they would shoot us.

What other challenges have you faced?

[In addition to our work], we have another burden [an order for forced porters and navigators] from the DKBA splinter group [as well as the BGF and Tatmadaw] that started [during the fighting between the DKBA splinter group and BGF]. Since it began, I have served as a BGF porter and navigator on the front line for almost two months [between October and November, 2017]. I have to go [serve them] again soon [on November 23rd 2017]. We were forced to go in

Buddhist has not signed the preliminary or nationwide ceasefire with the Myanmar government whereas the DKBA Benevolent has signed both agreements.

⁶ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military throughout KHRG's 25 year reporting period. The Myanmar military were commonly referred to by villagers in KHRG research areas as SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) from 1988 to 1997 and SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) from 1998 to 2011, which were the Tatmadaw-proclaimed names of the military government of Burma. Villagers also refer to Tatmadaw in some cases as simply "Burmese" or "Burmese soldiers".

⁷ Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions of the Tatmadaw were established in 2010, and they are composed mostly of soldiers from former non-state armed groups, such as older constellations of the DKBA, which have formalised ceasefire agreements with the Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw. BGF battalions are assigned four digit battalion numbers, whereas regular Tatmadaw infantry battalions are assigned two digit battalion numbers and light infantry battalions are identified by two or three-digit battalion numbers. For more information, see “[DKBA officially becomes Border Guard Force](#)” *Democratic Voice of Burma*, August 2010, and “[Exploitation and recruitment under the DKBA in Pa’an District](#),” KHRG, June 2009.

⁸ Bo (Officer) Bee commands the Kloh Htoo Lah which is one of the three current DKBA Battalions, the others being Kloh Htoo Wah and Kloh Htoo Baw, that were formed in September 2011 and refused to transform into Tatmadaw Border Guard battalions. Kloh Htoo Baw (Golden Drum) referred to the DKBA before 2011, but was then reconfigured to have the two additional battalions as well. DKBA forces in Hpa-an and Dooplaya districts that refused to transform into Tatmadaw Border Guard battalions began fighting Tatmadaw forces in November 2010 and have been variously referred to as DKBA #907, Kloh Htoo Baw, Golden Drum, and Brigade #5.

front of them [the armed groups] in areas that were contaminated with landmines even though we were afraid of the landmines.⁹ We had no choice.

Who forced you [and others villagers] to be porters?

The armed group [BGF] ordered the village head to send villagers [to be porters] for them, so the village head had to choose people to leave the village in order to serve as porters. The village head also had no choice; he had to choose his fellow villagers to serve as porters. Ultimately, the village head chose me to go on behalf of my village. I decided to go with them [BGF] to the front line so that the armed groups would not harass the village leaders.

How far is the front line from your village?

It is a day's journey walking to the front line.

[A day's journey] round trip?

No, it is only one way and it takes the whole day.

What did you have to do on your trip?

I had to walk ahead of them [soldiers] and guide them to the front line.

What did the other porters have to do?

They had to carry rice, oil, chili, other foods, and other materials such as ammunitions for the BGF. For me, I had to show them [BGF and porters] the way to the front line because I am a native villager of the area where fighting is occurring [T--- village]. My mother is a T--- villager and my father is a Y--- villager, so I know the area. The other armed group, which is the DKBA splinter group, also threatened me and said that they will assassinate me. This made me anxious since I was guiding the BGF. They [the DKBA splinter group] are based in the T--- area. The BGF does not know the area so they forced me to show them the way and I had to do it because they have guns.

Did they [the armed groups] beat you?

They have not beaten me yet, but they have scolded me many times. Sometimes, they would abuse their power when they were drunk. We are civilians without guns, so we always have to be humble under their abuse and their power. We are afraid of all of the armed groups. We always have to follow their orders whenever they tell us to carry ammunitions and food because we live close to the fighting. I told them [BGF], "*Don't order the other villagers to serve as porters because I am here to follow your orders on behalf of them. If I was not here on behalf of them [villagers], I would not be able to say anything regarding [others becoming porters].*" Consequently, villagers face food shortages in their families' livelihoods [when they work as porters] because they do not have time to work for their family food and income. Before I left my family to be a guide [for the BGF] last time, I had only two bowls [1.563 kg] of rice for my family and [it was the harvesting period, but] I could not harvest my farm to help my family. Thus, I informed the village head about this and told him to help me by providing one sack of rice [50 kg] to my family. After I had served as a guide for the BGF on the front line for almost two months, I returned to my house, my family did not have rice; they had to borrow rice [and other food] from our neighbours. When I arrived home, I also did not have any money, so I had to

⁹ In a previous News Bulletin KHRG reported that these landmines were laid by DKBA splinter group. See "[Ongoing fighting, displacement, landmines, porter demands, and child recruitment in Hlaingbwe Township, Hpa-an District, October and November 2017](#)," December 2017.

borrow money from my neighbour in order to buy rice [food]. I fell into debt. Moreover, they [the BGF] ordered me to guide them to the front line again so I have to leave tomorrow [November 23rd 2017].

Where will you have to go this time?

I have to go to T--- area this time.

If you do not follow their orders, what do you think they would do to you?

I do not know what they would do to me if I do not go. Because they gave me orders, I have to go. Y--- villagers are facing the most problems [due to the presence of armed actors]. We are afraid of all of the armed groups such as the BGF and DKBA [Tatmadaw] whenever they enter our village. Y--- villagers are facing problems with armed groups such as the DKBA, BGF and Tatmadaw. They are facing more problems because all of them commit [abuses] against villagers whenever they enter into the village. Most Y--- villagers are poor. When they are troubled by the armed groups, they did not have time to secure their family income and food. Sometimes, when they [armed groups] give urgent and threatening orders to us [Y--- villagers] we have to rent motorcycle taxis from X--- village to travel and fulfil their orders on time. This is because if we walk, we will not reach them on time. Whenever the [DKBA splinter group] or BGF order us to meet with them or do something on their behalf, they never provide motorcycle fees [travelling costs] for us so we have to use money from our own pockets. Consequently, as we are villagers and we do not have money, we fall into debt when we borrow money from our neighbours for our travelling costs. We have to pay back our debt after we finish their [armed groups'] orders.

Whenever they [armed groups] order food, do you always give food to them?

Yes, we always have to give food such as pigs and chicken to them because we are afraid of them. The armed group that orders food the most is the DKBA splinter group. I remember last time I conducted logging for my family income, the DKBA splinter group taxed me 3,000,000 kyats [\$2,260.34 US]¹⁰, but I could not sell all my logs [planks]. I could sell only some of my logs [planks], so I could not make the amount of money required to pay the tax. The DKBA burned my sawmill down and broke my petrol barrel by firing bullets, so I lost my money and fell into debt. Now, whenever I build houses for people in order my debt back, they [the people I build houses for] pay me only 100,000 kyats [\$75.36 US] instead of 1,000,000 kyats [\$753.78 US] because I am indebted to them. I still have to pay 400,000 kyats [\$301.58 US] to my nephew this year. He also asked me to build his house for him in order to pay back my debt, so I will have to do that [this year] after the harvesting season. I am in a difficult situation and I struggle every day.

Unfortunately, [during and after the harvest period], I am pressured to do forced military labour again, helping the armed groups [BGF] navigate to the front line because they do not know the way without me. I know the way, but I fear the landmines and gunfire from the opposing side [DKBA splinter group] because I am just a villager so I don't have a gun [to protect myself]. I have to be cautious among the soldiers in order to remain safe. I do not feel completely safe going in front of them [leading the way], but they force me to, so I have to go in front of them. I have no choice and I cannot do anything [to stop the armed groups]. It is a very difficult situation and a risk for me. They [armed groups] know that my family currently does not have enough rice, but they keep forcing me to go [serve] them.

¹⁰ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the February 19, 2018 official market rate of 1,324 kyats to US \$1.

As you mentioned regarding your family above, your children are so young and your wife was left behind [without food], did [your family's food shortage happen] because you were busy serving the armed groups and you did not have time to look after your family?

Yes, this is correct. For example, if I did not have to serve the armed groups as a guide for more than a month and a half, during that period, I could have worked as a daily labourer or any other job to secure my family's income in order to purchase rice. I am poor, so I do not have any other job opportunities. Therefore, I have to work as a daily labourer for my family. If someone pays me to clean vegetation, construct houses or do any other jobs, then I have to do these things whenever they pay me. I work on my farm as well, but rice paddy plants are not always reliable because they can be attacked by insects, so sometimes we get more rice and sometimes we get less rice from plain farming.

How many baskets¹¹ of rice did you get [harvest] this year?

I got only around 25 baskets of paddy this year because the paddy plant that I planted the first time was destroyed by insects and the young paddy plants regrew later. As a result, I [and my family] could only harvest the amount that I have from the farm, so my family did not get enough rice this year.

Regarding your trip tomorrow to be a navigator for the BGF, will there be any security risks?

Of course, there is the risk of [stepping on a] landmine in the fighting area, as well as the risk of the DKBA splinter group shooting at me. If I die, it is done [I cannot do anything for my family]. A rumour spread that the DKBA splinter group Second Commander-in-Chief Bo Bi ordered his soldiers, *"Whenever you see Hpuh W--- [Saw Z---, the villager being interviewed], shoot him first. Hpuh W--- is originally from T--- village, but he [married a Y--- villager and] lives in Y--- village. Nevertheless, they [BGF and Tatmadaw] might force him to be their guide when they come to T--- area, so shoot the guide first."* The DKBA splinter group ordered their soldiers to shoot the guide first and other armed groups [BGF] force me to walk ahead and serve them as a navigator, and I could not do anything. I am concerned for my security and it is the most difficult situation for me. Bo Bi and all other armed groups call me Hpuh W--- because [of my physical attributes] but my real name is Saw Z---.

Who forced you to be their guide?

He is the BGF Non-commissioned Officer (NCO) Maung Na. I asked them [BGF], *"If I die, will any people take responsibility and take care for my wife and children?"* They did not reply. I already understand that, if I die in this job, nobody will look after my children and wife. The [BGF] will only blame me [for my death] and say that I went to a place I should not have gone to. This is what I predict will be my future. Soldiers [armed groups] say things [but do not keep their word]. For example, if something is impossible, they will say it is possible. I am the only representative from my village [serving the BGF] so no one will be my witness if I die except for the soldiers [from the armed groups]. If they [DKBA splinter group] shoots me, they [BGF soldiers] may blame me for getting shot because I was disobedient and went to an area where I was not supposed to be. They [the BGF] will tell this to my children and wife. If they do not use this excuse, then they may come up with other excuses so that my death does not seem like their fault.. They will not say that my death happened because they [BGF] forced me to go ahead of them and will not accept that my death is their fault.

Did you bring weapons [to protect yourself] during your time with the BGF?

¹¹ A basket is a unit of volume used to measure paddy, milled rice and seeds. One basket is equivalent to 20.9 kg or 46.08 lb of paddy, and 32 kg or 70.4 lb of milled rice. A basket is twice the volume of a big tin.

Yes, I did. I held a gun [while I walked ahead of them]. They did not give me the gun [and did not want me to have one], but I just got one for myself [without listening to them] because the other armed group [DKBA splinter group] hate me. They know that I am familiar with the front line area so they are angry with me.¹² I heard that they [DKBA splinter group] will shoot guards who are not holding a gun, so I was worried for my security. I held the gun in order to confuse the DKBA splinters soldiers so they would not catch the difference between a BGF soldier, and a villager [me]. I just pretended to be a soldier because not every DKBA splinter group soldier knows me, so this is my way [of protecting myself]. If the DKBA splinter group soldiers recognised me, they will shoot me and I will die. They [BGF] do not want me to hold a gun, but I told them, *“If you do not allow me to hold a gun, you have to walk ahead of me [to the front line].”* They did not [dare to] walk ahead so they allowed me to hold a gun and then I had to walk ahead of them. I held the gun, but I do not know how to fire [use] it so I just held it in fear.

I did not have any time to secure my family’s livelihood since I was not paid for the time that I was forced to serve as a BGF guard. The poverty that I faced [as a result of being a guide] caused my family’s food shortage. My children and wife have to work very hard to secure their livelihoods without me. Sometimes, they have enough food, but sometimes they do not. If I have money, my family can secure their food and other things without me. On the other hand, I sometimes get paid to construct houses and conduct logging by other villagers in other villages such as in U---, V--- and T--- villages. Sometimes, I do not receive much income to secure my family’s livelihoods working these jobs: some people cannot pay me on time so I also have to wait until they have money to pay me. Whenever I receive money, I send it to my family in order for them to buy rice [food] and pay medical fees. My wife is not well. Sometimes, she has headaches and neck pain. She has taken medicine and medical injections many times, but she does not feel better. She was sick many times while I was away from my serving as a BGF guard.

Did anyone look after your wife when you were away from her?

No, no one [looked after her] and my children are too young to look after their mother.

If you tell your leaders [BGF authorities] that you cannot go [serve them as a navigator] and you refuse to follow their orders, do you think they will abuse you?

I told them, I did not dare to go with them and I could not serve as their guard [because of my wife’s health condition]. They replied, *“You must do it and you must serve us [as a navigator].”*

Who said this [the above comment]? Who arrested you from your house?

The man who arrested me and forced me to be a military navigator is [the BGF Non-Commissioned Officer] Maung Na. I was forced to serve as a navigator by the BGF during the entire harvesting season [October-November 2017], so my children and wife had to harvest the paddy alone. My wife worked in the sun a lot and got headaches, which she still gets until now. As a woman, she is not strong enough to handle the entire workload for the family. She had to take medicine during the harvesting period, and after she took medicine, she continued to work

¹² According to the 1949 Geneva Convention III and 1997 Additional Protocol I, as well as other sources of customary international law (IHL) civilians are defined as “persons who are not members of the armed forces” and those who do not carry arms openly. Therefore, this villager’s status as a civilian is complicated by the fact that he was forced to act as a navigator for the BGF and KNLA, as well as by the fact that he chose to openly carry a weapon while accompanying the two armed groups to the front line. IHL is ambiguous as to whether members of armed groups, such as navigators, are considered civilians or not, however, it is possible that this villager lost his status as a civilian by openly carrying a weapon, and was thus no longer protected as a civilian under IHL from attack by armed forces while he was on the front line.

on the farm. My wife and children had to cut bamboo and logs, build a rice barn [and fulfil other needs] by themselves. They harvested paddy for more than one and half months. There are five family members, including me, in my family. I have three children. If I am with them during the harvesting period, I can help them on the farm. When I was on the front line, I was concerned for my family's livelihoods and how my wife and children were doing when I was away from them.

When I arrived home, I asked my children and wife, *"Did anyone help you on your farm?"* She replied, *"I just had to collect paddy in the rain and was not able to separate the paddy from the leaves [because of the unfavourable weather] and put them into the rice barn."* I replied to them, *"Keep doing as much as you can because we cannot do anything else."*

Does your wife allow you to go to the front line?

No, she does not. But she also could not do anything when I was forced to go with them [armed groups]. She just said, *"If you have no choice, just do it. I will collect whatever I can from our farm."* In this situation, nobody can do anything for us because they all have their own workloads. I think other families who have older children can overcome this difficult situation. I have two siblings in the village and the others live far from me. Sometimes, my younger sister and my wife had to take care of each other. My sisters' husbands also are busy [working for their family's livelihoods]. My older sister also has a baby and she has to take care of her cows, so she cannot afford to look after my wife. I suggested to [BGF and village leaders] that they should rotate the villagers who serve [the BGF] as a guard, but they did not agree with me.

Who did not agree with you?

The BGF armed group.

To clarify, they did not allow other villagers to replace you and you had to serve them until the end of the fighting, correct?

Yes.

So you have been serving them since the fighting started, right?

Yes. I am still being forced to serve as their navigator, so I have to go to the frontline tomorrow. I spent only two days with my family. I returned this time in order to check how my children and wife are doing. I made offerings to the spirit on my farm and freed one [spirit in a] tree according to our traditional beliefs, because my wife does not know how to do it. Then, they [BGF and KNLA] ordered me to go to them tomorrow. I thought I would go today, but one of the villagers, Pa Dteeⁱ told me, *"Thara/Tharamu¹³ [KHRG researcher] wants to meet with you."* I replied to him, *"I am not sure whether I have time to meet with him/her or not. When and where do I have to wait for him/her?"* He said, *"This afternoon."* So I decided to go tomorrow. I do not want to go, but I have to do it against my will. My wife is still sick. If I do not go, I know that they [the BGF] will abuse me, but I do not know how. I think, if I decide not to go, I will move to Thailand because my parents and my in-laws are there. I lived in Thailand [when I was a child] because my parents fled to Thailand during the conflict period. After the situation improved, I returned to my village. I am also concerned that if I move to Thailand, they [the BGF] may be angry with me and destroy my land, my livestock and my house. For example, if they kill my cow for meat, I cannot afford to buy a new one. If this happens, I will face more serious livelihood challenges.

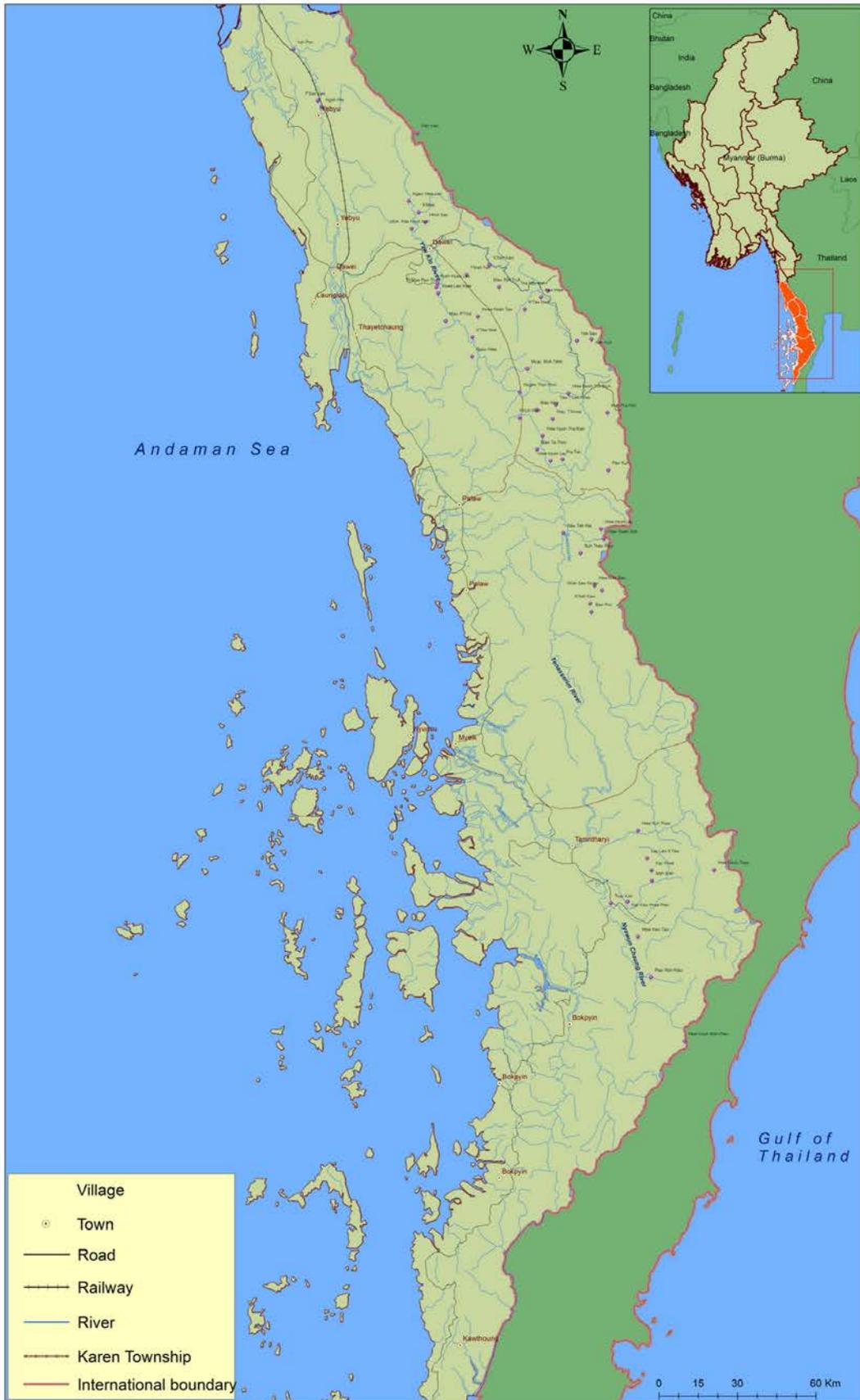
Thank you so much for providing information for us.

¹³ *Thara* (male) or *tharamu* (female) is a Karen term used for any teacher, pastor, or any person to whom one wishes to show respect.

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

- “Hpa-an Situation Update: Paingkyon Township, Hlaingbwe Township and Nabu Township, November 2016 to October 2017,” (March 2018)
- “Hpa-an Situation Update: Hlaingbwe Township, Paingkyon Township and Nabu township, March to May 2017,” (August 2017)
- “Three separate killing incidents based on witchcraft suspicion in Hpa-an District,” (July 2017)
- “Hpa-an Interview: Naw A---, September 25, 2016,” (July 2017)
- “Hpa-an Short Update: Hlaingbwe Township, March to October 2016,” (April 2017)

Mergui/Tavoy (Thanintharyi) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)

¹⁶ *Pa Dtee* or *Dtee* is a familiar term of respect in S’gaw Karen attributed to an older man that translates to “uncle,” but it does not necessarily signify any actual familial relationship.