



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

October 6, 2017 / KHRG #17-32-A3-11

Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Hpuh A---, January 2017

This Interview with Hpuh A--- describes events occurring in Dawei Township, Mergui-Tavoy District in January 2017, including the current refugee situation and the refugee repatriation process from Myanmar/Thailand border camps.

- *Hpuh A--- reports that refugees living in Tham Hin refugee camp on the Thai border, do not want to go back to Burma/Myanmar as they perceive that there is no stability in Burma/Myanmar.*
 - *The Thai government has informed refugees in Tham Hin refugee camp that they can go back to Burma/Myanmar; nevertheless, many refugees request that United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), relevant Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and the Karen National Union (KNU) make housing, security, livelihoods, education, and healthcare arrangements to support their repatriation.*
 - *In addition, many refugees also request the Tatmadaw to withdraw their army camps so that repatriated refugees can feel secure and free.*
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Interview | Hpuh A---, (male), B--- village, Dawei Township, Mergui-Tavoy District (January 2017)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Tham Hin refugee camp, Thailand in January 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 Mergui-Tavoy District, including eight other interviews, and 100 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Tham Hin refugee camp committee member

Position: [Censored]

Can you please tell me where you live, where you work and about your family?

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.

My name is Hpuh³ A---. I live in Tham Hin refugee camp.⁴ My position is a [censored] in the refugee camp. I am also a member of the [Tham Hin refugee] camp committee.

After the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement [NCA]⁵ was signed, I have heard [more news] about the plan to repatriate Burma/Myanmar refugees [from Tham Hin refugee camp]. As someone who lives in the [Tham Hin] refugee camp, what do you think of this plan? Do you want to stay here or do you want to return to Burma/Myanmar? Please tell me your opinion on the repatriation plan.

Yes. This is a good question that everyone in the refugee camp should reflect on. As I am a refugee, I will tell you about what I know regarding the repatriation plan. Both the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] and the NGOs [Non-Government Organisations] always questioned us about whether we want to return or not. According to the UNHCR and the NGOs, we have to tell them if we can return [if it is possible] and when we should return [when it is appropriate]. As for us, we do not want to return because we know that there is instability [in Burma/Myanmar]. Thai government [representatives] from Bangkok came to tell us [refugees in Tham Hin camp], *"You can return. We have already discussed and made an agreement with the Burma/Myanmar government"*. This is just an oral agreement, however, and we still have not yet seen an official written agreement. That is why we know that we cannot go back yet. However, we still have to prepare for [our] future repatriation. In December 2014, we went to meet with the Karen National Union [KNU] leaders in Mergui-Tavoy District in order to discuss our preparation [plans for repatriation].

Personally, do you want to go back or do you want to stay here [in Tham Hin camp]?

Regarding the repatriation plan, we [the Tham Hin refugee camp committee and the Karen Refugee Committee] have to conduct a survey again in the camp regarding how many people want to return, how many people want to stay and how many people want to migrate to a third country. We already conducted the survey once in the past. According to the previous survey, more than 40 percent of the [Tham Hin] refugees wanted to return, more than 10 percent of the refugees wanted to stay here and the rest of the refugees wanted to migrate to a third country.⁶ As for me, I have never wanted to migrate to a third country. I also do not want to stay here. I just want to return to my village.

Regarding the repatriation process, do you already know where you will live when you return? Have you heard [any information] about what the KNU, the Burma/Myanmar government or the UN will do for you [all repatriated refugees from Tham Hin camp] if

³ *Hpuh* is a Karen term of respect for an elderly man that translates to "grandfather," but it does not necessarily signify any actual familial relationship.

⁴ For more background information on the location and history of Tham Hin refugee camp, please see "[Where We Work: Tham Hin](#)," The Border Consortium.

⁵ 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.

⁶ More information on this survey can be found on the following Karen News article: "[Refugee Survey – Most Do Not Want To Go Back To Burma](#)," July 2013.

you return regarding access to education, healthcare, your family's security and livelihood?

Honestly, we do not have any land [for living and for working]. When we [refugees] lived in Burma, we lived in Mergui-Tavoy District. We do not have any land to provide for our new generation. Therefore, if we plan to return, the KNU will arrange our living places. That is my understanding. Regarding the land for work, the UNHCR and the NGOs told us that arrangements for working land have not been made yet. Nevertheless, they [UNHCR] said that they will arrange for us to get jobs when we go back in order to support our livelihoods. That is why they [UNHCR] provided vocational trainings for us in the camp such as hairdressing training, cooking training, sewing training and mechanical training. Therefore, we can use these vocational skills if we return to Burma/Myanmar. If we have children, we can pass on these skills to our children. If we do not have children, we can also pass on [these skills to] our young people.

Have you been informed in advance about where you will live if you return? Have the KNU and the Burma/Myanmar government already arranged the repatriated land for you? If so, did they explain whether they will build houses for repatriation or if you will have to build houses by yourself?

Regarding repatriation, they did not explain [the housing details] clearly to us. As for me, I lived in B--- village in the past. My land and my house were in B--- village and they remain in my village. Other people came to stay in my house and on my land but if I return there will be no problem for me because I know and have a good friendship with those people who stayed in my house. However, it is only I who will not have this [housing] problem, which is not good [because other refugees will face a housing problem]. There are many refugees in the camp so therefore we have to consider those who do not have lands or houses to return to. However, they [the KNU or the Burma/Myanmar government] have not made any [housing] arrangements for us if we go back. We already requested for an accurate and precise map measured with GPS that will show us where we would live if we return.

What about security and access to healthcare? Has any arrangement been made for that if you return?

Yes. We need security and access to healthcare and education. Therefore, we must discuss [these needs] with the KNU. We also want to request the UNHCR to arrange it [security and access to healthcare and education] for us. We already requested it [from both the UNHCR and the KNU].

Have they already decided how many acres of land each refugee will get if they return?

They have not yet decided how many acres of land will be provided per person. However, if we return, we already requested for land to live in B--- village, C--- village and on D--- plain area. We also requested for land to live from Hsa Wah stream to Baw Chaw Law area [in Dawei Township, Mergui-Tavoy District]. Some of the land that we requested is secured by the KNU and some of the land is owned by other villagers. I think it will be good if the KNU decides how many acres of land will be provided to each refugee [so that there will be no conflict].

After the NCA was signed, how has the situation changed in the refugee camp? What issues do refugees face? Do they have freedom? How is the current situation different from the past situation?

In terms of the differences between the present and the past, after the NCA was signed, many refugees usually travelled back and forth without permission from the camp to Burma/Myanmar. I am not saying that they returned to live in Burma/Myanmar. They returned to their village temporarily in order to maintain and cultivate their land. In the past [before the 2015 NCA] we dared not return [to our lands in Burma/Myanmar]. Currently we have limited freedom of movement.

What about the Thai government? Do they allow the refugees to travel?

The Thai government does not allow refugees to leave the refugee camp. They [local Thai government authorities] already told us, “*You have to stay in the refugee camp as you are refugees. You cannot leave the camp*”. However, the refugees try to independently find their own ways to leave the camp but they have to be careful when they go out.

Did they [refugees] leave the camp secretly? Or did they leave publicly?

They just leave the camp secretly. They find their own ways to be leave the camp which allows them to avoid getting arrested by the Thai government.

Regarding the future repatriation plan, where do you [all refugees] want to live and what are your plans for the future?

Regarding our future, as I once told other refugees, we are like a group of ants who are stuck on a leaf. If it rains, we will flow towards the bank of the stream or towards small rocks; this is the level of our lives. We cannot reach the land [we feel insecure because our lives are unstable and we cannot achieve our dreams]. I will tell you what we want. Firstly, we want either the UNHCR or the NGOs to arrange or help us until we can go back to live in Burma/Myanmar. Secondly, we want to let the KNU know in advance what we need if we return so that they [KNU] can prepare. Thirdly, the Tatmadaw have built their army camps in Mergui-Tavoy District. Specifically, they base [their army camps] near B--- village and E--- village. We want the KNU to recognise those villages as land for us to be repatriated to. We especially want the Tatmadaw army camp in B--- village to be removed because we will not feel secure and free so long as they remain active near the village. We just want to live freely and peacefully. We also want the future repatriation plan to consider our healthcare and education needs.

Many refugees fled to Thailand due to the civil war in Burma/Myanmar but many refugees do not only stay in Tham Hin refugee camp, they also fled to many other places along the border such as Hju Moo Taung area [in Thailand]. Have you heard about any repatriation plan for the refugees in Hju Moo Taung area?

We do not know about the situation [for refugees] from that area. We just live in the [Tham Hin] refugee camp and we only know about the situation in the [Tham Hin] refugee camp. Perhaps there might be a repatriation plan for the refugees in that area but I am not sure. Currently there is a survey being conducted in Tham Hin refugee camp because UNHCR recently came to build their office in the refugee camp. Those who want to return can go and report to the UNHCR office in the refugee camp in order to return. However, most of the people in the camp want to go back according to what the refugee camp leaders will arrange. Six people from our camp returned to Burma/Myanmar in 2016. They went back to live in Whay Ta Eh [Myitta] Town. However, when they went back, those six people did not let us know [in advance]. Therefore, we were unable to inform the KNU about their return and so it seemed as though the KNU was not looking after the refugees who returned. In fact, the KNU are trying to help us but we worry that refugees will just return independently.



This photo was taken on February 7th 2017. This Tatmadaw camp near B--- village is close to the area where refugees want to resettle to. It concerned villagers who live near the army camp even though villagers said that the Tatmadaw were not actively disturbing them. It was difficult to take photos closely because the Tatmadaw do not allow anyone to take pictures of their army camps. [Photo: KHRG]

Did they [refugees who returned independently] go back to live in the places that the KNU arranged? Or did they go back to live in their own places?

They just went back to live in their own village. They did not go back to live in the place that the KNU designated as a refugee return place. I will explain to you about the refugees' situation. There are three different types of refugees in the Tham Hin refugee camp.⁷ Firstly, there are some people who fled to Tham Hin refugee camp due to the civil war. Secondly, there are some people who fled to the [Tham Hin] camp because they wanted to migrate to a third country. Thirdly, there are some people who fled to the [Tham Hin] camp because of livelihood problems and because they cannot earn any income in Burma/Myanmar so they came to look for shelters and jobs in the [Tham Hin] refugee camp. There are three different types of refugees who want to return. Firstly, there are those who want to live in their own village if they return. Secondly, there are those who want to rely on their relatives to provide them with a place to stay if they return because they have already sold their land. Thirdly, there are some people who do not have any land, especially the revolutionists' [the Karen National Liberation Army soldiers] relatives and families so they want to go back with the arrangement of the KNU leader and they want to live in the place that the KNU provides.

Do you have any suggestion and advice for Tham Hin refugees? Please tell me if you have anything that you want to say.

Our Tham Hin refugees do not listen to our camp leaders, especially the KRC [Karen Refugee Committee]. We [refugees] have to follow our [KRC] guidance. Regarding repatriation, we should follow their [KRC] plans. Recently the KRC sent repatriation plans to the KNU. Then, the KNU formed a refugee return committee who is responsible for monitoring and organising the repatriation plan. We must prepare [for repatriation] but we cannot return yet. We will wait for their [KRC] arrangements and repatriation plan. When they say that we can return, we will return. We have to survive by any means necessary. We have to be strong. As I am a Christian, I believe that God will never abandon us [refugees]. When we first came to live in the camp, we got 16 kilos of rice [per month, per person] and we survived. Then, the food ration was reduced and we got 12 kilos of rice but we survived. Again, the food ration was reduced and we got 10 kilos of rice but we are still able to survive with it. I understand that God looked after us. Therefore, we should not behave like a naughty child [we should stay positive and not disobey our camp leaders].

⁷ Hpuh A---'s summary of the different types of refugees in Tham Hin refugee camp reflects a complex situation along the Thai-Myanmar border in which those who strategically displace have multiple and overlapping motivations. All residents in the Tham Hin refugee camp nonetheless are officially recognised by UNHCR as refugees because they all have “a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.”

Do you have any other things that you want to say?

The questions that you ask are really good. We also have a plan to conduct a survey in which we will interview every individual refugee regarding what they want to do [in the future]. That is all I want to say. I do not have any other things to say. The last thing I want to say is that I believe God will look after us and I believe that God will protect us from danger. That is what I hope for the most.

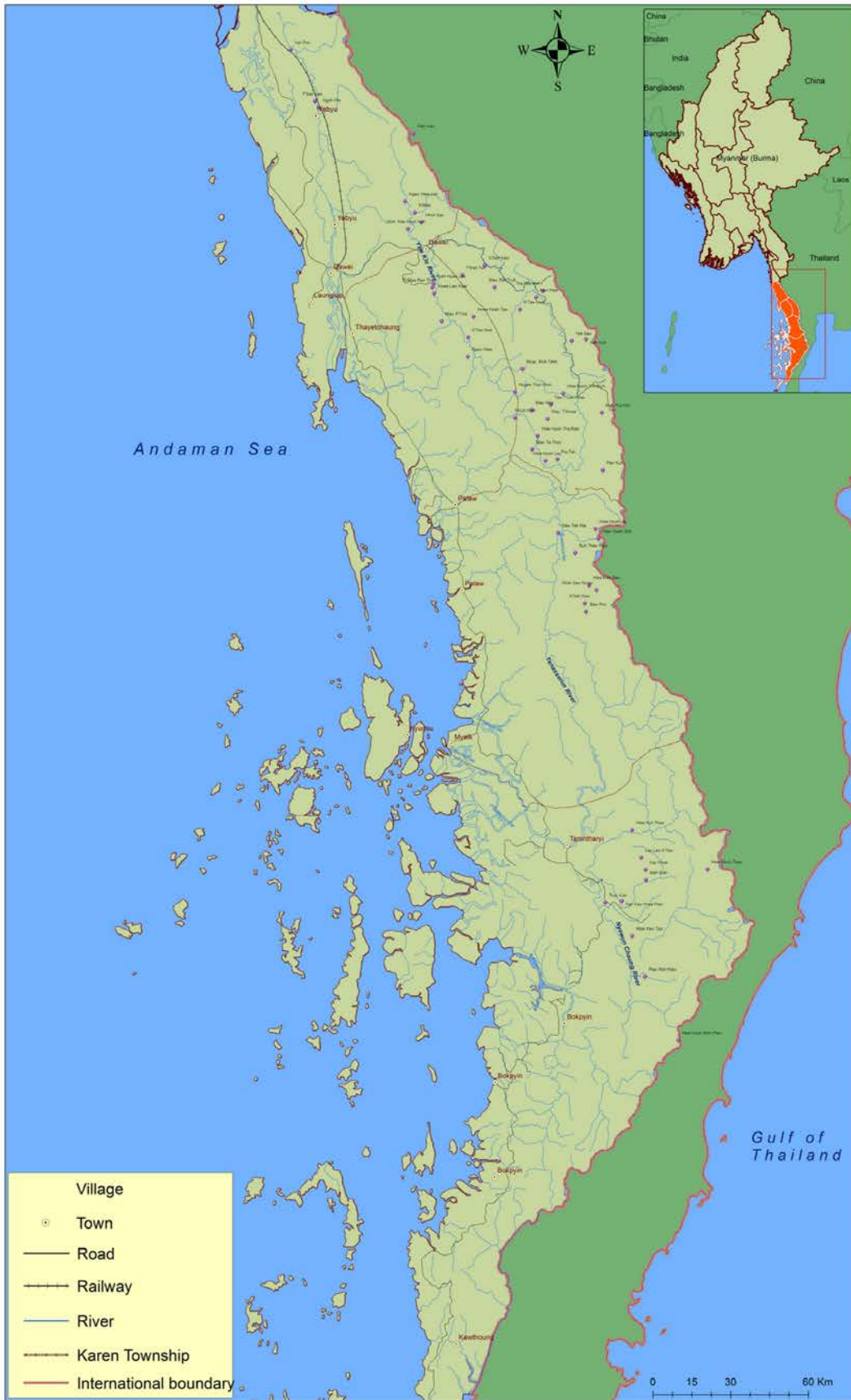
Thank you so much for sharing information.

Thank you too.

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

- “Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Saw A---, March 2017” (September, 2017)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Saw A---, February 2017” (September, 2017)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Saw A---, February 2017” (September, 2017)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ta Naw Th’Ree Township, 2017” (July, 2017)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Dawei Township, February to May 2015,” (June 2017)

Mergui/Tavoy (Thanintharyi) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)