



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

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Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Pu Bm---, March 2017

This Interview with Pu Bm--- describes events occurring in Ler Mu Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, in March 2017, including information on a dam construction and its long-term effects on the lands of local people.

- *Villagers reported that a hydropower dam will potentially be built close to Moh Roh village. The construction of the dam, carried out by a Thai company, could negatively impact the lands of local people. They fear that the dam will cause major flooding, which would damage their housing and livelihoods. These effects will then result in the displacement of community members.*
 - *The local community is concerned about damage to their lands, unfair compensations, and the necessity to find alternative ways to secure their livelihoods.*
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Interview | Saw Pu Bm---, (male), Bn village, Ler Mu Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District (March 2017)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Mergui-Tavoy District on March 2nd 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 seven other interviews, two situation update and 100 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Unknown

Occupation: Pastor

Position: Pastor

Could you tell me your name, your village and a little about the situation in your village?

My name is Pu Bm---- and I live in Dawei Town.

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.

In 2007, the Tatmadaw³ attacked this area and therefore we moved to Htee Moh Pga. After the Tatmadaw attack, we founded a church here [in Htee Moe Pga].

In 2009, a company that wanted to build a dam [in the local area] came to the village and held a meeting with villagers. The company told the villagers about their proposal to build a dam and asked the villagers to share their opinions. As a response, villagers said that they did not want the dam project because it could lead to negative consequences. However, the company workers said, it is not possible [for them] to forbid the proposed dam because it was ordered [by the authorities]. The company workers informed the village head, the pastor and the elders in Moh Roh village since the proposed dam site is near Moh Roh village.

They also examined the proposed dam site for a year, and then they left. During the examination process, local villagers asked [the company workers] about the potential consequences [of the dam]. They told us that there would not be huge flooding. [They also said] that it would not damage plantations and the local area because there will only be limited flooding. They told us this in order to gain our consent. However, we knew that there will be flooding in every plain. The company workers examined a place called Tha Meh Hkee in order to know where the water in the dam will flow. In between Tha Meh Hkee and K'weh Hkee area, there are no high mountains. Therefore, company workers proposed that P'Yoh Kwee [a shallow area of water] would be the main place to maintain water from the dam. This is because it is located at a lower altitude. Otherwise, the water will flow out and the area would not be able to maintain such a big amount of water.

In this case, we know that if the dam project is built, local people in the area will face difficulties. The local people who will become displaced [by the flooding will face worse conditions than] people who have fled from the conflict. Some people who face military conflict can stay in their place when others are fleeing. But in the case of the dam, every local person will face the same situation and be displaced.

Villagers who live in the plains near the proposed dam site are worried that the company worker will forcefully take their lands and settle in the area. In this case, local people do not want to allow the dam project. Villagers tried to forbid the dam project but as they do not have authority, they do not know whether their desire will be successful or not.

The company workers told us that this proposed dam will surely be built in the next 25 years. However, the dam project can be either successful or unsuccessful. Local people are worried that if the dam project is successful, it will have negative consequences for them. The company workers promised local villagers that they will provide compensation for damaged lands and plantations.

However, we know that all of the lands in the plain will be damaged. The local people will have to settle in the mountainside. As a result, villagers will have to cultivate land on the mountainside, which is more difficult to cultivate than in the plain. Regarding this, company workers claimed that they will provide all the necessary seeds to help villagers work on their plantation. They also claimed that it will be an easier lifestyle [cultivating plantations on the mountainside] and not as hard as the way villagers used to do. They persuaded us by saying that there will be no more traditional agriculture because they will bring pineapple seeds, grape seeds and sugarcane to cultivate on the plantations, [crops] that can be more beneficial.

³ 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".

But for villagers, this new lifestyle will be difficult as we have never worked in this way before. Even though the company claims that they will provide compensation for all damaged lands, the compensation can benefit local people for short-term only but our plantations are beneficial for the long term. We cannot trust the company as they promised this only to persuade us. We know that we will face difficulties [if the dam project is implemented].

How did the company worker explain the proposed dam project to local people?

They did not tell us where the electricity generated from the dam project will be sent to. However, we know that they have a business strategy for this dam. They also claimed that they will gather all of the local people in this area in one place and that they will build houses for us, then will install electricity and water supplies.

However, this is not what we want. We would like to live in a peaceful traditional way because we cannot see the consequences and problems that will arise in the future. The company did not come back since they have left this area. But they will come for sure [at some point]. If they do, we want to report this case to the authorities.

When they came back, did the company workers tell you about the place where the local community will be resettled?

At one point, they took some young people to the bottom of Lay Muh [mountain] and told them that local people will be gathered in that place. They [said that they] will build houses for local people. They said local people should not stay in a different place because it will be difficult to install electricity for them. Therefore, the company will gather villagers from 18 villages together in one place.

Did the company have any plans to help villagers with their livelihoods, education or healthcare if the dam is built?

The company only discussed building houses for local people. They did not talk about anything related to livelihoods, plantations, education or healthcare services.

According to your opinion, what are the potential challenges for local people?

Local people will face challenges such as losing their plantations, cattle farm or pastures for domestic animals.

Did the company have a plan to provide compensation and livelihoods support for local people, especially for villagers who secure their livelihoods by trading wood?

They did tell us that they will provide compensation for local people base on the number of plants on their plantation. People who have more plants will get more compensation and people who have less will get less. However, we do not trust that they will be honest. For those who do not have any plantations, they have to become casual daily workers.

Did they share any information about how long they will support villagers after the dam is built? Is it two to three years?

They told us that they would compensate each tree [planted in villagers' plantation] for 3,000 Thai baht. They will support local people for three years after the dam is built. Local villagers will have to find their way of securing their livelihoods and their income at the end of those three years.

Where did they get permission from, the Burma/Myanmar government or the Karen National Union (KNU)? Did they bring any permission documents [with them]?

They had some challenges with the KNU⁴/KNLA⁵ (Karen National Liberation Army) when they first came to this area [to examine the proposed dam site]. The KNLA did not allow them to do so. In this case, they went back again and asked permission from the [KNU] District leaders. Because of this, the local villagers did not dare to confront the company to fight for their rights because they held a permission letter from the District level.

Was the company from Burma/Myanmar or from foreign countries such as China or Thailand?

It was a Thai Company [Italian Thai Development Public Company Limited (ITD)]⁶, but some of the company workers were Bamar [ethnic Burmese] people.

Do you know the name of the company?

I do not remember the name of the company.

Some local villagers heard that the permission letter that they brought was out of date. I do not know this is true or not. Do you know anything about this?

They did not bring any permission letter when they came here for the first time. When they tried applying for it they faced challenges. They first came without permission letter but examined this site as they wished. This is a way of oppressing local people. At that time, the villagers who live near the proposed dam site faced difficulties.

How many times have they examined the place? Have they started their project and decided where they will construct the dam?

The place they examined was on the upper side of P'yoh Kwee [a shallow area of water]. When I asked them where they will construct the dam, the company workers said that they will construct it from P'yoh Kwee area to Ler Ter Hkok and towards the upper side, at the bottom of a rocky mountain.

How many times did the company workers come here? How long has it been from the time that they came until now?

It has already been eight years from the time that they came and left.

Did they inform the local people when the dam project will start?

⁴ The Karen National Union is the main Karen group opposing the government.

⁵ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the KNU.

⁶ Italian Thai Development Public Company Limited (ITD) is Thai company with investment in construction of highways, railway, dam, industry in Myanmar and other parts of Asia. ITD construction project have resulted in relocation, destruction of plantation and lack of compensation for villagers, see "[Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Saw E---, July 2012.](#)" March 2013. ITD also have investment in Dawei Special Economic Zone (SEZ) which began as a joint venture with Max Myanmar Company. The Dawei SEZ has resulted in environment destruction, threat and forced eviction of villagers, imprisonment of villagers who refused to relocate, destruction of livelihood through plantation, farming and paddy damaged, forced to accept inadequate compensation. Improper facility at relocation site, see "[Dawei SEZ Fact Sheet.](#)" Mekong Watch, December 2016. Also see "[Proposed Hydropower Dam Project in Tanintharyi Region, Mergui-Tavoy District, 2017](#)", June 2017 and "[Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Saw A---, March 2017.](#)" September 2017.

They did not tell us when the construction of the dam will start. However, they left a marking point in the area. They asked a local [in chard] to look after the marking point they set up. They paid him a salary. He was asked to record the time when the tide is over. After they went back, they never came again. They did not tell the villagers when the dam will be constructed. However, it is certain that they will come back again.

Do you think the company will continue the dam project, what is the local people's desire for this?

I think that they would not stop the proposed dam project. They will implement it for sure, but we do not know whether it will be successful or not. Local people completely disagree with the proposed dam project, but we cannot do anything.

What are the potential consequences for local people from the 18 villages [that will be affected] by the dam? For example, how much will the damaged plantations, belongings and plantations cost?

If the dam project is implemented, the plants in local plantations will be damaged, including coconut trees, durian trees, betel nut trees and other agriculture in Kloh Hkoh area. Moreover, we will lose our pastures for domestic animals and cattle. We cannot estimate the cost of these resources, but it will be a lot of damage.

Did the KNU, Burma/Myanmar government or any other organisations investigate and research this proposed dam project?

The KNU investigated the company once when the [company workers] were here. The Burma/Myanmar government did not do any investigation or research, and neither did any other organisation.

But the military [Tatmadaw] that settled in Htee Moh Pga area also claimed that they do not agree with this dam project. They [the Tatmadaw] also encouraged the local people to oppose the construction of the dam.

Did the [Tatmadaw that settled in Htee Moh Pga area] oppose the proposed dam project directly or did they only encourage the local people to oppose the dam?

The Tatmadaw did not oppose the dam directly but only encouraged us to oppose the dam.

Have any NGOs or CBOs done any research or investigations on this issue?

No organisation came to investigate the proposed dam. However, an organisation came to question villagers about it.

Did this organisation take any responsibility for local people?

The organisation did encourage and give suggestions to local people to confront the proposed dam. But they did not take any other responsibility.

What did the organisation suggest?

They suggested to the local population that we should ask for the permission document when the company comes, and we should also ask for the company's name, and then report them to the organisation.

Which military groups and military commanders are responsible in the local area?

When the company was examining the proposed dam site, the Tatmadaw military group [Battalion] #557 cooperated with the company [to provide security]. Therefore, we know that the Tatmadaw will not help villagers to confront the proposed dam project.

What about the KNLA, did they ever give any suggestions or help the villagers to confront the proposed dam?

When the company examined the place where they intended to build a dam, they did so without holding any permission document [from relevant authorities]. The KNLA helped villagers confront this situation. The leader is KNLA officer Thu Hkoh Eh Baw. He encouraged villagers to confront the proposed dam project together. He told us that we should not confront the dam by using arms or weapons. Instead, the villagers should demonstrate [to show] the company that we do not agree with the proposed dam. He asked villagers to gather together but some distant villagers did not come. Therefore, we conducted a demonstration with some nearby villagers that came and gathered with us including the KNLA officer Thu Hkoh Eh Baw.

How do you feel as a villager about the proposed dam?

Several challenges will arise for local people in this area [if the dam is built]. Therefore, on behalf of the local people from Htee Moh Pga, I want to report this to authority so that Burma/Myanmar government and international governments will know about this problem.

Do you want to talk about any other issues?

I want to express that, if the proposed dam is built, it can worsen displacement for local people in Htee Moh Pga, Tanawthri river [Tanintharyi] area. The displacement caused by the dam will be worse than displacement caused by the armed conflict we have experienced in the past. Therefore, we want to share this with the world so that the world will know. We want the world to consider the local people who live in Htee Moh Pga, Ta Naw Th'Ree (Tanintharyi) River area. Every village in the local area will face trouble.

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

- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Dawei Township, February to May 2015,” (June 2017)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Naw M---, October 2015,” (October 2016)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ler Muh Lah Township, November 2015 to January 2016,” (August 2016)
- “Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women’s testimonies from southeast Myanmar,” (August 2016)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ler Doh Soh Township, June to November 2015,” (July 2016)

Mergui/Tavoy (Thanintharyi) District



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