



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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### Interview

November 28, 2017 / KHRG # 17-50-A2-11

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## Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, March 2017

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*This Interview with Saw A--- describes his concerns in Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District. Saw A--- shares his perspective on the gold extraction project on the Meh Kleh Lo River which negatively impacts on local villagers by causing water pollution and damage to water channels. The interviewee also provides information relating to the situation of education in the village.*

- *A gold extraction project in Meh Kleh Lo River, B--- village, Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District has damaged the villagers' water channel system which consequently causes water shortage problems and polluted water for village and farm supply.*
  - *Child labourers were hired in the construction of a water piping system during the summer period when their schools were closed.*
  - *According to Saw A---, the local civilians are feeling disappointed about the gold extraction project because they are concerned that they may not be able to farm this year due to damage to their water supply.*
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### Interview | Saw A--- (Male, 43), B--- village, Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun 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 Hpapun District on March 28, 2017 and is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.<sup>1</sup> This interview was received along with other information from Hpapun District, including three other interviews, one situation update, 69 photographs and 9 video clips.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

**Ethnicity:** Karen

**Religion:** Buddhist

**Marital Status:** Married

**Occupation:** Farming

**Position:** Village head

**What is your name?**

My name is Saw A---

**How old are you?**

I am 43 years old.

**What is your ethnicity?**

I am Karen.

**What is your religion?**

I am Buddhist.

**What is your occupation?**

I am a farmer.

**Which village tract do you live in?**

I live in Waw Mu village tract, Dwe Lo Township.

**Do you have children?**

Yes, I do.

**How many children do you have?**

I have six children.

**How old is your eldest child?**

My eldest child is 13 years old.

**What about the youngest?**

The youngest one is two years old.

**How many sections do you have here [in this village]?**

There are four sections in this village. In my section, there are about 45 households, so there might be 200 households overall. We make a living by farming.

**Do the villagers have enough food to eat?**

No, they do not have enough.

**How do those who do not have enough food to eat manage [to survive]?**

They usually manage by cutting wood and bamboo and selling it at the market.

**So, people from outside come to buy wood and bamboo from this village?**

No. Villagers just sell it amongst each other, for example they sell to those who want to buy wood and bamboo. The situation differs from year to year but for most of the year villagers are faced with food insufficiencies. It is likely that at the end of the year their food supplies will run out. [There are a] proportionally higher number of poor people, while only a small number of people [in the village] have stable livelihoods. Some people do not have any land [to farm] so it is hard for them to make a living.

**Is there any organisation that work in your village?**

The project on the Meh Kleh Lo River has many negative consequences and it even negatively impacts on animals like cattle, which were found dead.<sup>3</sup> Next year's conditions will be really harsh for us.

**What are these tough conditions?**

There is a water shortage problem. There will not be any drops of water at all [hyperbolic expression]. This might be related with the gold extraction.<sup>4</sup> I assume the work of gold extraction impacts the places and locations where water sources are available.

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<sup>3</sup> For more reports on the effects of gold mining in Hpapun District, see Hpapun Situation Update: Dwe Lo Township, "[January to May 2016](#)," September 2016, and "[Hpapun Situation Update: Dwe Lo Township, May to August 2016](#)," January 2017.

<sup>4</sup> This process involves placing crushed ore into piles where a cyanide solution is poured over it to dissolve the gold and allow it to 'leach' out of the pile and also into the ground. This process risks contaminating the surrounding area and is heavily regulated by many nations.

**Is it [gold extraction project] in Meh Kleh Lo River?**

Yes, it is.

**Is it far from here?**

No. It is close to our village.

**Is Htee Baw Kwaw a place, or an irrigation system where villagers collect water?**

Do you mean in Meh Kleh Lo River?

**Yes.**

It is a channel system where local villagers collect, utilise and consume [water for plantations and for themselves].

**It's said that the extraction is conducted by a company. Do you know which company that is?**

No, I have no idea [about the company] because I was so busy and I did not have time to ask about it. But, it is said that the project was conducted by groups from outside the local areas. However, I believe there may be some internal [local] people involved too.

**How have they extracted the gold? Have they extracted [the gold] by panning or by using a truck?**

They processed the gold with a truck.



The photo on the left was taken on February 27<sup>th</sup> 2017 in Meh Kleh Lo River beside B--- village, Waw Mu village

tract, Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District. It shows people panning for gold.

The photo on the right was taken on February 28<sup>th</sup> 2017 in Meh Kleh Lo River area, B--- village, Waw Mu village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District. It shows the water that is irrigated from the river to villagers' farmlands. The water is very dirty and polluted, however cattle have to consume the water. This gold panning project was reportedly conducted by Saw Hpa Hsa, who is a wealthy villager of B--- village, Waw Mu village tract, Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District. *[Photos: KHRG]*

**Was there any damage to villagers' possessions like their land?**

Their land has been damaged since the DKBA<sup>5</sup> took control of the area.

**So this area has been a place for gold extraction since then until now?**

Yes, it has been processed like this ever since then but they have done much more [extraction] in this year.

**You said they did more [extraction] this year. Who did more? Are they from the military elite or are they wealthy individuals?**

It was conducted by civilians [wealthy individuals].

**Did you say that the place is called Htee Baw Kwaw, which is where the water channel system utilised by local villagers is?**

Local villagers collect water from there during the rainy season.

**Did they [wealthy individuals] receive the villagers' permission before conducting this kind of activity [gold extraction]?**

I have no idea whether they received villagers' permission or not.

**Have you heard whether any conflict has cropped up regarding this project?**

There might have been but I honestly don't know. It also depends upon the situation, villagers have been facing this kind of action [situation] for years and as they have seen no action being taken, they just let it go.

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<sup>5</sup> The Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), formerly the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, was formed in December 1994 and was originally a breakaway group from the KNU/KNLA that signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burma/Myanmar government and directly cooperated at times with Tatmadaw forces. The formation of the DKBA was led by monk U Thuzana with the help and support of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the name of the military government in Burma/Myanmar at that time.

**Does the project have any connection with organisations such as the KNU [Karen National Union] or the Township or District leaders?**

I do not know about that.

**What did they do to help local villagers receive damages?**

I do not know about that either.

**Do the local villagers consume water from the place where the project took place? For example, do villagers utilise the river for farming and using it for irrigation systems on their plantations?**

As far as I know, cement has been brought to the project site to rebuild the damaged drains and to enable the water channel system. Now the place where they are panning for gold leads straight to the water channel system for use on plantations. But, I don't know the date of it because [at the start of the gold extraction project] I was so busy.

**You said at some places [near to the project site] the water springs have dried up.**

Yes, some have dried up and some have darkened [become polluted].

**Are there other places where the project will be conducted?**

They will also conduct [gold extraction] in this river here but I don't think it will be good for B--- village because a previous project that was conducted in a river in the lower part of this village and villagers did not receive compensation [for damages].

**Who managed the project at the lower part of the river?**

That person has gone already. However, many people are involved there including villagers.

**Do you know who took responsibility for the new project in the river here? Have you taken responsibility yourself or did the people who came to conduct the gold extraction give you responsibility to manage [the project yourselves]?**

The township leader handles and takes responsibility for it [running the project] but the local villagers were also asked to check the area where the water flows [to see if the water had been contaminated or not].

**So, where do the cattle go to drink water?**

They have to drink the muddy [contaminated] water.

**As the cattle have to drink dirty water, have you heard whether any of them have died [or suffered from complications]?**

No.

**Are they [those who run the extraction project] panning only for gold or for other gems as well?**

They are panning for gold.

**Which villages are near the project site?**

The project site is near B--- village and C--- village.

**Which village suffers from the most destruction?**

B--- village suffers from the most damage.

**Does Meh Kleh Lo River dry up in the summer time?**

In the past, we could still get access to water from the river even though the river dried up [pockets of water were left]. But now we can't.

**What about road projects for travelling and transportation?**

No.

**Is there any healthcare being provided here?**

We have access to healthcare monthly [via mobile health workers]; in the past they came twice a month.

**Do they [health workers] provide malaria assessment at the same time [and also provide] treatment?**

Yes, something like malaria treatment.<sup>6</sup>

**Regarding a water piping system, do the villagers receive a water pipe to their houses, or is a pool [water storage] provided for the villages to collect water from?**

People have to do [collect water] by themselves, but they are still building the system [for water pipes]. They already installed stuff [the water pipe system] and now only need to build water storage facilities.

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<sup>6</sup> More accurate information is not available as the interview was unsure on the exact treatment provided.

**Which river are they working in [to pipe water from]?**

They are working in the Cha Ku Lo River. As it is summer time now, many children go and work there.

**How much do the children get paid in a day?**

They earn 5,000 kyat [US \$3.66]<sup>7</sup> per day; their job is to throw the stones [to build the water piping system]. This is done between Waw Mu village tract boundary and the water channel system which is between Waw Mu village tract and Meh Choke village tract. It has not reached the water source yet [along the Meh Kleh Lo River]. I have [also] seen a Chinese company conducting a [gold] project in a river located in Meh Choke village tract.

**The Chinese are also involved in gold panning here?**

Yes, sure.

**Do you know the name [of the company]?**

No, I don't.

**Is there any project that provides daily living [support] for local people?**

No, there is nothing special.

**So, they [company responsible for the gold extraction on Meh Kleh Lo River] only provide the water [piping] supply. Is that right?**

I don't think they will even provide water [for villagers].

**So, the [gold extraction] project only provided compensation by rebuilding the water channel systems. Is that right?**

Yes, because the boss of the project lives [here] in B--- village.

**How many farmlands utilise the water channel for plantation usage?**

Maybe, there are about 40 farmlands or... [respondent is not certain].

**Just guess how many.**

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<sup>7</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 11<sup>th</sup> November 2017 official market rate of 1,364 kyat to US \$1.

It provides water for numerous farmlands, which are situated around the irrigation channel.

**After they finished implementing the [gold extraction] project, are there any problems that the local villagers encounter?**

I guess there can be problems which have popped up because of excavating the water channel. It makes the sand flow onto the farmland. Therefore, if they refill the holes [dug for excavation] with soil after digging the ground, it [the situation] will be better. Villagers are requesting [the gold extraction workers] to refill the holes close to the area of the water channel. If they do not dig out land for the gold excavation project, it will be very good [for us] because we live very near to the site. This year, the local civilians are feeling disappointed because they are concerned that they may not be able to farm this year, yet they are still waiting to see what is going to happen.

**Can you tell me who the key person that conducts this project is?**

As I heard, his name is Tee Cha. Villagers said he is the main person that has handled and controlled this project; he is a villager from B--- village.

**And, his name is Tee Cha?**

Yes, His name is Tee Cha or Tee Maung Cha.

**How much profit does he earn on a daily basis?**

I don't really know because I don't pay attention to what he's got. It doesn't mean that this is not concerned with me; in fact, it is really concerning to us.

**Did they consult with villagers or you before conducting this project?**

I have not been called for any meeting or consultation yet.

**How many trucks do they use for the project?**

They use five trucks.

**So, there might be lots of places that have been excavated.**

Yes, sure. They [excavate] almost endlessly both day and night.

**What about the advantages and disadvantages [of the project for the community]?**

There are mostly disadvantages. However, there is no problem for them [people who conduct the project] at all, because they do whatever they want. But, looking at the perspective of civilians, there could be many problems that crop up.

**Are they all Karen people? Are there any Chinese [companies] involved?**

The project which takes place along the water channel is conducted by a group of Karen people. Sorry, I am wrong; they are mostly Bamar.<sup>8</sup> But I do not know who takes responsibility in the other areas such as Kler Hta.

**Do you have a Tatmadaw camp in your village?**

Yes, it is located in the lower part of the village.

**Do you know who leads the camp?**

His name is Bo<sup>9</sup> Aung Kyaw Myint.

**How many times per month do they rotate their troops?**

I think they rotate their troops every four months.

**Has [Bo] Aung Kyaw Myint been here for a long time already?**

No.

**Have there been any human right violations committed [by the Tatmadaw soldiers]?**

I have not heard anything about that yet.

**Has there been any practice of extortion or something like using voluntary help [forced labour] from villagers?**

No, I have not seen that. In the past, it [requests for forced labour] just happened once when they were proposing to borrow boats for transporting rations but none of us had any boats. So, they [Tatmadaw] got Chinese owned boats when they came to construct a water supply system from D--- [village] to here.

**Did that happen last year?**

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<sup>8</sup> The majority ethnic group in Myanmar, also known as ethnic Burmese or Burman.

<sup>9</sup> *Bo* is a Burmese title meaning 'officer.'

No, it just happened in January 2017.

**Was that conducted by [Bo] Aung Kyaw Myint?**

No, it was conducted by his colleagues.

**Are there any existing schools in B--- village?**

Yes.

**What is the maximum standard<sup>10</sup> in the school? How many teachers are in that school?**

I don't know how many teachers the school has.

**Is the school run by the Burma/Myanmar government?**

Yes, it is. Sometimes, we have no idea about what is happening with the teachers. We have no clue if they will finish their contracts. They just come and go back [as they are not recruited from the local area].

**In this kind of situation, did the school replace the teachers?**

No. Teachers are compensated to receive maternity leave in case they have to give birth but [in the case of one teacher on maternity leave] her position has not been replaced because the villagers hired them with a contract [to teach until the end of the year]. Now, the school has added one more teacher who was sent by an [unknown] organisation to teach Karen subject [language] in school.

**How much do the teachers earn?**

They earn 500,000 kyat [US \$370] a year. Now, we are not sure whether they are willing to do [work] or not.

**Is the school run smoothly? Are the school supplies, which are provided annually, sufficient? Is the school run by KED [Karen Education Department], or taught using the KED curriculum?**

The teachers are staying in [our] village and I don't know whether they are connected to the KED.

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<sup>10</sup> A standard refers to a school year in the education system of Burma/Myanmar. The basic education system has a 5-4-2 structure. Primary school runs from Standard 1 to Standard 5, lower secondary school is Standard 6 to Standard 9, and upper secondary school is Standard 10 to Standard 11.

**Has the Karen subject been taught for a long time already?**

It has just started to be introduced this year as it was requested by villagers.

**Did any dispute occur from teaching Karen subjects alongside the Myanmar government curriculum?**

I have not seen any conflict or dispute regarding this, because it will not be fair for Karen people to not learn their language. It will not be good for the Karen people if they cannot read or write in their own language.

**Is it easy for local people to make a living here, what opportunities do they have?**

People that have more money and have sufficient materials to do their work, can do it [sustain their livelihood] easily. But those who are poor and do not have anything face difficulties.

**Have you been as a village leader for a long time?**

No, I became a village leader a couple of months ago. I called meeting this morning and notified them to attend the meeting at 07:00 A.M but they came at 09:00 A.M. So, there is still no unity between us.

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

- “Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, July 2015,” (April 2017)
- “Hpapun Interview: Saw B---, October 2016,” (March 2017)
- “Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, March 2016,” (January 2017)
- “Hpapun Field Report: January to December 2015,” (December 2016)
- “Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, June to August 2016,” (November 2016)

# Mu Traw (Hpapun) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)