



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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**Interview**

November 28, 2017 / KHRG #17-88-A1-I1

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**Bago Interview: Saw A---, August 2017**

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*This Interview with Saw A-- describes his perspective on events occurring in Pyu Township, Bago Region bordering Moo Township in Karen National Union [KNU] territory area, during the period between 2015 and 2017, including a decrease in the price of rice, livelihoods' challenges, education, health, social events and development.*

- *Since the price of rice dropped in 2016, farmers from B--- village, also known as C--- village, Eastern Ka Nyut Kwin Town, Pyu Township, Bago Region and other areas have faced challenges in their livelihoods. As a result, they struggled to organise social events and to afford health expenditure and to provide financial support for their children's education. Many young people chose to migrate to Thailand or Mandalay and the Irrawaddy region to seek out job opportunities.*
  - *Villagers highlighted the difference in the price of rice in recent years between the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) and the National League for Democracy (NLD) governments; the price of rice during the USDP government was 600,000 kyat [US \$441.81] per 100 baskets, but it fell to 400,000 kyat [US \$294.54] per 100 baskets of rice during the NLD government.*
  - *Saik Bank loans money to the farmers in B--- villagers, but the cost of hiring daily workers is higher than the price they receive for their rice, so farmers are in a difficult situation when it comes to repaying their debt because they have to sell more rice than previously in order to have the same income.*
  - *Villagers reported this issue in order to get attention from the government and they also request the Burma/Myanmar government to consider their points and address the low price of rice and the comparatively high cost of labour.*
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**Interview | Saw A--- (male, 38), B--- village, Pyu Township, Bago Region (bordering Moo Township in KNU-defined Karen State) (August 2017)**

*The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Bago Region bordering Moo Township in KNU-defined Karen State on August 13<sup>th</sup> 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 Bago Region including one situation update, six photographs and one video clip.<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

**Ethnicity:** Karen

**Religion:** Christian

**Marital Status:** Married

**Occupation:** Farmer

**Position:** Villager

**I am working for the Karen Human Rights Group [KHRG]. Can I interview you about your experiences farming?**

Yes you can.

**Could you please tell me your name?**

My name is Saw A---

**How old are you?**

I am 38 years old.

**What is your marital status?**

I am married.

**How many family members do you have?**

I have eight family members in total.



This photo was taken on August 13<sup>th</sup> 2017 by KHRG community member in B--- village, Eastern Ka Nyut Kwin Town, Pyu Township, Toungoo District, Bago Division. This photo shows interviewee Saw A--- expressing his perspectives and experiences of challenges farming following a reduction in the price of rice. [Photo: KHRG]

**What responsibilities do you take in your village?**

I don't take any responsibilities.

**What is your religion?**

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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.

I am a Christian.

**Can you tell me your address; village, township, district and region?**

I live in B--- [in Karen known as C---] village, Tha Pwin La village tract, Eastern Ka Nyut Kwin Town, Pyu Township [bordering Moo Township in KNU-defined Karen State], Bago Region.

**I would like to interview you about the farming process, the market price for rice and green beans, your livelihood and income. How many years have you been a farmer?**

I have been a farmer for around 20 years.

**As you have been a farmer for 20 years, you know the experiences of farmers. How many acres did you farm this year?**

The farm that I worked on this year is around 20 acres in size.

**What is the price of rice this year?**

Last year's [2016] rice price was not good. We only received 400,000 kyat<sup>3</sup> [US \$293.15] per 100 baskets<sup>4</sup> in Ka Nyut Kwin Town, so the price was too low in comparison with our workload. We farmers have enough paddy to support our family, but we cannot support [the cost of] our children's education. The price the year before last [2015] was up to 600,000 kyat [US \$439.70] per 100 baskets, so that was enough [income] for the farmers. Some young people from my area have knowledge [education to find jobs elsewhere] so they migrated to Thailand or went to other areas like Mandalay Region and Sha Ma Laung Town in the Irrawaddy Region for work.

**How much do you [farmers] have to pay a daily worker for their labour?**

We [farmers] have to pay 5,000 kyat [US \$3.66] per day, which is the same amount that teachers receive; teachers get 5,000 kyat [US \$3.66] per day and daily workers also get the same. We can sell one basket of rice for 4,000 kyat [US \$2.93], but we have to pay a daily worker 5,000 kyat [US \$3.66], which is unsuitable [too expensive] for farmers. As a result, we have to pay out 1,000 kyat [US \$0.73] more than the price that we receive [for selling the rice]

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<sup>3</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 16/11/17 official market rate of 1,364.90 kyat to US \$1.

<sup>4</sup> 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.

and this makes for a very difficult situation for farmers and their livelihoods. I don't know what will happen [regarding the rice price] in the coming year [2018].

**What is the price of green beans?**

The price of green beans is getting lower and is now only around 22,000 kyat [US \$16.11] per basket, this price is too low for the farmers [to make any profit]. The price of crops, such as rice and green beans is low, so paying the wages of daily workers is problematic.

**How much rice do you get per acre [of farm land]?**

I cannot tell you the specific amount of rice that we get from each acre. We probably get around 60 baskets of rice [per acre]. We do not use chemical fertiliser in our area, like other people do.

**How about the [size of your] green bean crop?**

For around the last three years, I got a bigger green bean crop, I think, at that period, insects did not attack the green bean [plants] much, but now we do not get a large green bean crop [because insects eat the crops]. I used to get three carts<sup>5</sup>, which is equal to 70 baskets<sup>6</sup> of green bean crop in the past, but these days I only get around 40 baskets [roughly 1½ carts].

**How many acres of land do you use to grow your 40 baskets [of green beans]?**

There are five acres.

**What are the prices for rice and green beans this year?**

This year the price of green beans and rice are not good. The price of rice is around 420,000 kyat [US \$307.58] per 100 baskets this year, but we have to hire a truck for 20,000 kyat [US \$14.64] [to carry the rice to market] so there is only 400,000 kyat [US \$293.22] left for us. Furthermore, if we mill the rice, we have to pay the cost of milling.

**How many family members do you have including, you and your wife?**

I have eight family members.

**Does your family have any other livelihood challenges related to farming?**

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<sup>5</sup> 1 cart is a colloquial form of measurement equivalent to roughly 25 baskets of produce.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

As I mentioned above, the crop price is low and it is not balanced compared to the amount of work involved for the farmers [to grow their crops]. We have enough rice, but we do not receive any income for our families. My family is healthy so I do not face serious livelihoods challenges. However if my family faces a health problem, I do not know how I will deal with the [financial] challenge. If the price of rice is like the last two years [2015], which was 600,000 kyat [US \$439.66] per 100 baskets, it will be better for us [farmers] and we will be able to support our children to go to school.

**Are there any development projects for the farmers in your area; like loaning money?**

Yes, there has been a money loaning project for the farmers running for the last two years<sup>7</sup> [since 2015], but I would like to explain it like this; they [Burma/Myanmar] government's bank, Saik Bank [agricultural bank]<sup>8</sup>, loan money at 100,000 kyat [US \$73.25] per acre of farm, but if we have ten or more acres of land, they loan [at the maximum amount of] 1,000,000 kyat [US \$732.54] in total. I have a farm, around 20 acres in size so I borrowed 1,000,000 kyat [US \$732.54] from them. In the past [2015], the rice price was 600,000 kyat [US \$439.66] per 100 baskets, so when we sold 200 baskets of rice for 1,200,000 kyat [US \$878.91], we still had 20,000 kyat [US \$14.64] left for us. The current rice price is only 400,000 kyat [US \$293.22] per 100 baskets so we have to sell more than 200 baskets of rice to be able to pay off our debt. This year, they loaned 150,000 kyat [US \$109.85] per acre so I got 1,500,000 kyat [US \$1098.54]. The rice price is 400,000 kyat [US \$293.22] per 100 baskets, so we have to sell more than 300 baskets of rice. If the price of rice is 600,000 kyat [US \$439.70] per 100 baskets, like it was in the past, we would only have to sell 300 baskets of rice and we would get 1,800,000 kyat [US \$1,318.45]. Then, there would be 300,000 kyat [US \$219.72] and 100 baskets of rice left for us, so that would be fair and suitable [related to the amount of] the farmers' work.

**So the price for rice and green bean this year is not good, correct?**

Yes, [it is not good in] the Eastern Ka Nyut Kwin area, Bago Region, but I don't know the price of rice and green beans in other areas. Some farmers do not understand [the government crop price process], I am aware of it, but as there are no farmer representatives in parliament I cannot express my opinions [to the government]. There are no other job opportunities [besides

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<sup>7</sup> There has been an increasing amount of farmers being unable to repay their debts and defaults on loans have become more common. For more information see, '[Defaults up on the back of rising loans disbursed to farmers](#),' October 2017, Myanmar Times, and '[Rescuing Myanmar's farmers from the debt trap](#),' April 2017, The Economist.

<sup>8</sup> Saik agricultural bank is commonly understood by villagers to be part of the Burma/Myanmar government; however our researcher was unable to find out more specific information.

farming] for us, so even if we do not want to work on a farm, we have to. We do not receive suitable income from farming, but we have to do it.

**What [change] do you want to see in the future that would benefit farmers? What do you want to describe about the challenges that farmers face?**

There is only form of work in my area, which is farming. As we are farmers, we will get money only when we harvest our rice and green bean crops, so we cannot do anything when we need money before harvest time. We can get some money in a loan, but after we have used it [the loan] we then do not have any other income. Regarding [our children's] education, if we have four children, we can support only one child to go to school. If we send all of them to the school, we will face serious financial problems, because schools are far from our area and [we have to pay for] other [school] expenses. As we are farmers, we only get money in harvest time, so if we need money before then and after we have used up money that we borrowed from the [Burma/Myanmar government bank], we have to pawn our gold.

The cost of hiring daily workers and the price of rice [and green beans] should be balanced [relative]. The price of rice is only 400,000 kyat [US \$293.22] per 100 baskets, but the fee for daily workers is 5,000 kyat [US \$3.66] per day which is equal to one basket of rice as well as an additional 1,000 kyat [US \$0.73] per day and it is not fair for the farmers. We [farmers] just want balance between the cost of workers and the price of rice.

**Regarding the challenges for farmers, what is your opinion on the [Burma/Myanmar] government management system?**

As I am a farmer, I am not fully aware about politics and I just have some knowledge [about politics] from the radio. I just know that the price of rice before the National League for Democracy (NLD) government was 600,000 kyat [US \$439.70] per 100 baskets, but the price of rice is now only 400,000 kyat [US \$293.22] per 100 baskets, which is an unsuitable price for the farmers.<sup>9</sup> I am not criticising them [the government] because I am not well aware of politics and I do not understand about their party's management role. As I live in a rural area, I just received some information [about politics] from many other people. I also know that the price of rice during the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) era [2010- 2015] was 600,000 kyat [US \$439.70] per 100 baskets, but the price of rice has reduced now the NLD came into government so I do not understand about it [the situation]. I am not a high level leader, I don't have knowledge about the rules of law and I am just a person who is under the control [of the law]. We [farmers] do not have a right to speak out [express our opinions or feelings]. We are

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<sup>9</sup> For further information regarding the falling rice price in Burma/Myanmar, see "[Myanmar rice price falls as Chinese demand slows](#)."

concerned that, if we speak out [regarding our opinion and feelings], it may affect the dignity of the government [be interpreted as criticism]. I just want to highlight the different prices of rice between the NLD government and the USDP government eras. We [farmers] do not request a higher income, but we want a [fair] balance between the cost of hiring daily labourers and the price received by farmers for their crops. As I mentioned above, we have enough food [rice], but the price of rice and the fees for workers are not balanced so farmers have to face challenges when providing for social gatherings, as well as healthcare and educational challenges. For example, when our relatives visit us, we will only be able to serve them food when the price for green beans and rice is higher. We farmers from this area face challenges because we have food for ourselves only. We [farmers] do not have the right to criticise the government because we are just ordinary people who are under their control.

### **What do you want to say about these farmers' challenges to KHRG?**

I want them [KHRG] to report this issue to the government on behalf of us [farmers]. If the government can do it [address the price of rice] for us, our [farmers] situation will be better, but we could be in trouble if they do not do it for us. I request the government to do this [solve this problem] for all farmers, not for me alone. Regarding news that I got from the radio [about the low price of rice] and my understanding, this problem is not only in my area, other farmers from every place [in Burma/Myanmar] also face the same challenges. When the price of rice is low and we have to pay back the money that we have borrowed [from the bank], some people who have gold have to pawn their gold to pay their debt. People who do not have gold have to borrow money from other villagers' under high rates of interest in order to pay their bank debt and we have to get [extra money from lenders at high rates to clear our bank debt] before we get [more] money from banks. As I mentioned above, the current price of rice is low so farmers receive a lower income [compared to the past], but some people who were able to save some money during the period when the rice price was higher, are able to deal with this challenge a little bit better. As we borrowed money from the bank early in the year, we have to pay our debt at the end of the year and then, we have to borrow money again for the next year and continue this way. Like Saw D--- [villager], he had debt when the rice price was high, then next year when the price of rice reduced he faced even more challenges to pay his debt. If possible, please report this issue for farmers. Farmers also have their children to support as well as their livelihoods, education, health and social gatherings. If they [government] do not do something for us, we have to raise our children to only be farmers and they have to work this job regardless of whether the price of rice is low or high, because there are no other job opportunities.

### **Finally, do you want to say anything else?**

I would like request you [KHRG] to report the farmers' challenges that I reported on behalf of me and other farmers. We [farmers] cannot report this issue directly to the [Burma/Myanmar] government because there are no farmer representatives in parliament to advocate farmers' issues for us. As you interviewed me about this issue, could you please report this case for us? It will be very helpful if you [KHRG] report our challenges that we are facing; we will be very happy. We want to report this issue very much, but there are no liaisons between farmers and government [to carry this issue for us].

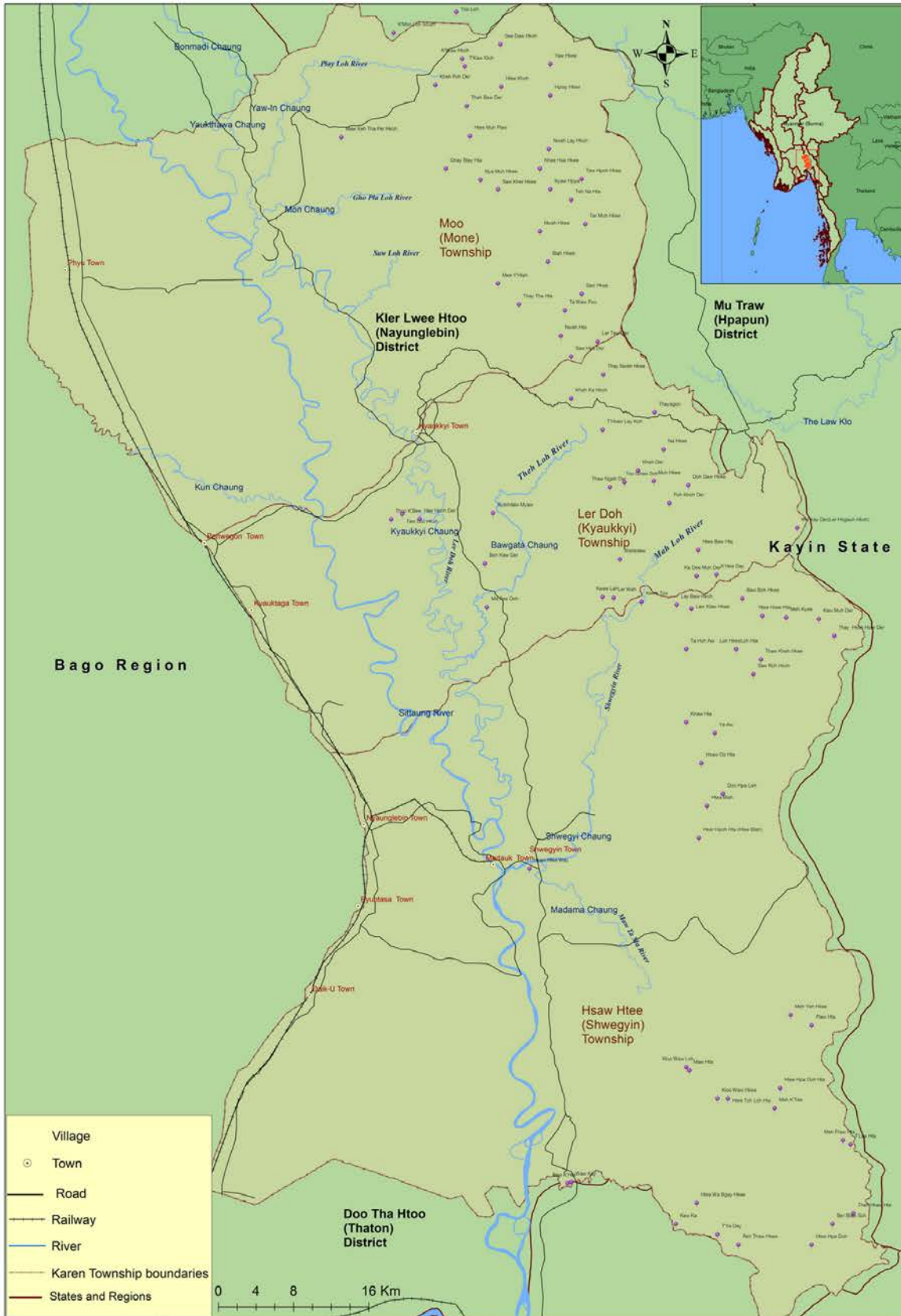
**Thank you so much for providing very good information for us [KHRG].**

I also would like to thank you [KHRG] for being a liaison for the farmers to communicate with the [Burma/Myanmar] government.

- Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Kyaukkyi Township, January to May 2017 "Nyaunglebin Interview: Naw A---, November 2016" (September 2017)
- "Two separate killing incidents committed by Tatmadaw soldiers in Shwegyin Township, Nyaunglebin District (March and May 2017)" (September 2017)
- "Nyaunglebin Interview: Saw P---, December 2015," (December 2016)
- "Nyaunglebin Interview: Naw I---, November 2015," (October 2016)



Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)