



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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**Interview**

December 5, 2017/ KHRG # 17-9-A1-11

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**Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, December 2016**

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*This Interview with Saw A--- describes events occurring in Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District, during the period between 1997 and 2016. The interview describes discusses forced displacement and past abuses by Tatmadaw since 1997. The interview also covers the villager's perspectives on education, livelihoods, the justice system and his concerns relating to youth and community development. This interview was conducted as research for KHRG's thematic report, 'Foundation of Fear: 25 years of villagers voices from southeast Myanmar'.*

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**Interview | Saw A--- (male, 50), B--- village, Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District (December 2016)**

*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 December 25<sup>th</sup> 2016 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 five other interviews, four incident reports, 40 photographs and 14 video clips.<sup>2</sup>*

**Ethnicity:** Karen

**Religion:** Animist

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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.

**Marital Status:** Married

**Occupation:** Farmer

**Position:** Village head

**What is your name?**

Saw A---

**How old are you?**

I am 50 years old.

**Where do you live?**

I live in B---village, Ler Mu Baw area.

**Which village tract?**

Ler Mu Plaw village tract

**What Township?**

Lu Thaw Township

**What District?**

Hpapun District, Brigade #5

**What is your ethnicity?**

I am Karen.

**What is your religion?**

My religion is Animism.

**What is your occupation?**

I work on a plain farm.

**Do you have another occupation?**



This photo was taken by a KHRG community member in Ler Baw area, Ler Mu Plaw Township, Hpapun District on December 25<sup>th</sup> 2016. This photo shows 50 year old B---village head Saw A--- describing his experiences of human rights violations committed by Tatmadaw and his perspectives on education, livelihoods, the justice system and his concerns relating to youth and community development. *[Photo: KHRG]*

For my personal job I am a plain farmer, but I am also a village head.

**Are you a Karen National Union (KNU) or a Burma/Myanmar government village head?**

I am the B--- village head.

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

I have eight children.

**How old is your eldest child?**

My eldest child is 26 years old.

**How old is your youngest child?**

My youngest child is 13 years old.

**How many households are in B--- village?**

There are [censored for security] households [in B--- village].

**How many B--- villagers are there?**

Of both male and female, there are 148 villagers in total in B--- village.

**What is the main villagers' occupation?**

Most villagers mainly work on plain farms and hill farms. Some of them are teachers.

**Do all the B---- households [villagers] get enough paddy?**

This year some villagers got enough paddy, but some other villagers did not get enough paddy.

**How many households got enough paddy, out of all the households?**

There were two thirds of the households that got enough paddy.

**Why did the other third of households' not get enough paddy?**

They did not get enough paddy because they borrowed some paddy from their neighbors last year, and this year they had to give paddy back to their neighbors, so they did not have enough [remaining] paddy.

**Did insects, pigs or mice attack their paddy?**

Yes, they did. There were plenty of mice and caterpillar attacks on the paddy that we could not stop, so some villagers did not get enough paddy [this year].

**So six households did not get enough paddy this year, right?**

Yes

**Regarding this issue, what advice did you give your fellow villagers [who did not get enough paddy]?**

Even if they do not get enough paddy [for this year] they do not have to be depressed, because we will look after each other for our future livelihood. We will try to help them with some [paddy], and they will also help themselves as well as they can. We will look after them when they are in a serious condition.

**What are the most important human rights for you?**

I think peace, freedom of movement, freedom to work, security and health are the most important human rights in my] life.

**So without peace, you cannot get these [freedom of movement, freedom to work, security, health] or your lands, right?**

Yes, we desire to have our lands and our farms. I think that we can do it [get our land back] when we have peace [in our country].

**What do you know/think about the rule of law and the justice system in your local area? For example, your villagers work on hill farms and you tell them to prepare the hill farm for planting paddy. Do you tell your villagers to burn [as part of slash and burn agriculture] all the farms at the same time [for safety]?**

No, it is not like that. We all have to protect our hill farms and take care of the fire when we burn [the topsoil of] our hill farms, so that other people's hill farms will not be burnt.

**So villagers should listen to the village head?**

They listen [follow the rules of the village], but we [all villagers] have to help each other if someone misses them [makes a mistake]. We teach and explain [the rules to] them so that they will not make the mistake again. If they do make the mistake again it will cause trouble for everyone [for our livelihood].

**Do you follow any of our Karen great-grandparents' traditional beliefs in the village?**

Yes, we have traditional beliefs that our great-grandparents' practiced. I told them to follow the traditional beliefs systematically, because we are ethnic Karen. Do not disobey [our traditional beliefs].

**Were there any human rights abuses in the past?**

Yes, there were some human rights abuses [committed] by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)<sup>3</sup>, between 1997 and 1998. They came and attacked [our area] for the whole of the year, so we could not [work] on our farm [for our livelihood]. We started working on our farms on May 15th [1997], then we had to flee [for our life] to another area, so we had to leave our farms. Then we returned to working on our farms again in July but it was too late [for planting paddy]. Furthermore, we worked on our farm for a while then we had to flee again for another five years and we couldn't return to our village. The negative consequence of the SPDC attacks was food shortages. Therefore villagers have been facing food shortages year on year, until now.

**Are there any Tatmadaw army camps that are based near B--- village?**

The Tatmadaw army camps are based in D--- village and E--- village, which are only one hour distance [walking on foot] from F--- village. The Tatmadaw army camps are close to our village.

**Do you know how many [Tatmadaw] soldiers there are, what they are planning, whether it is meant to trick villagers and whether it will be bad, and what their objectives are?**

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<sup>3</sup> State Peace and Development Council of the military junta ruling Burma/Myanmar at the time. The SPDC followed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) which ruled from 1988 until its dissolution in 1997. The SPDC was officially dissolved March 30<sup>th</sup> 2011 by Senior General Than Shwe following the election of a quasi-civilian government in Burma/Myanmar in November 2010.

I do not know their tricks. There are more based in our area and they do research on the situation of the local people, but we definitely do not meet with them. Therefore, we do not go to them. They stick to their own business [without disturbing us] right now.

**You [the villagers] do not go to see them and they also do not come [to see the villagers], correct?**

They want to come to us but we prefer not to meet with them.

**Do they try to organise and persuade the civilians to cooperate with them?**

They always say it [that the civilians should cooperate with them] when they campaign, but our leaders [the KNU] do not allow us to cooperate with them. Furthermore, we do not want to participate with them so we are happier when our leaders [KNU] forbid it. We do not go near them and they stay with their own business.

**Did the Tatmadaw army commit any human rights abuses in your area in the past? For example, did they kill villagers with guns [shoot on sight], eat villagers' chickens and pigs [theft and looting], burn out villagers' paddy and houses? Did any of these abuses happen?**

Yes, these [kind of abuses] happened a lot. They killed pigs, attacked and burnt houses and tents with guns, burnt pigs and chicken coops, burnt our rice barns, shot buffalos, shot the owners [of those belongings] and the people who worked on farms.

**Did the villagers have to go and get back their paddy [from the village in secret] at night?**

Yes. In the past, we always had to [go back to our village] and carry our paddy in dangerous situations.

**Did you go back [to your village] by yourself or go back with [the KNLA] or other villagers for security?**

If the distance [from our hiding place to our village] is close, we [villagers] went back by ourselves and guarded ourselves. Mostly, [KNLA] soldiers who were the security guards went with us. We had to follow them because we did not dare go back by ourselves.

**Did you or your family ever have to flee your village in the past?**

Yes.

**You said that you [and other villagers] can return and live in your own village without any danger, correct?**

Yes, the dangerous situation has passed.

**Do you have any other concerns?**

Yes, I do. I am concerned that the Tatmadaw will come and [attack] us [villagers] again.

**Why do you worry that they will come [to attack] you again?**

For example, if we go close to them then they will look for us and question us. We [villagers] definitely do not want to see [meet] them.

**Have you experienced war or conflict? How did you solve the conflict?**

We experienced many conflicts, but we found the solution [decided] that we would just live like we used to live; we will follow the way of our leaders [KNU]. We will listen to them, we will help them, we will follow the example of our leaders and we will live like them.

**So the KNU gave you advice about how to live, and you try to avoid meeting with the Tatmadaw because of their abuses?**

We decided to solve this [abusive situation] by avoiding meeting them [Tatmadaw]. Therefore, we have to avoid them and we must not go to see them.

**Did you build your temporary shelter in the jungle when you were fleeing?**

Yes, I did.

**How about the school?**

We also built the temporary school in the jungle.

**Did the teachers teach in the jungle?**

Yes, they did.

**How did the teachers teach the students in the jungle?**

We built the school and the teachers taught the students, year by year like this. We now have our permanent school in our village.

**Do you think there is justice for the human rights abuses that happened in the past?**

I think the perpetrators [Tatmadaw] get it [justice] for the abuses they suffered from, but the villagers do not get justice for the abuses committed against us by the Tatmadaw].

**Do you think they are right, regarding what they have done?**

No, it is wrong. They shot villagers on sight, ate the villagers' food and then killed the villagers. They destroyed their paddy by pulling out and cutting down the paddy plants.

**Has anyone [authority] resolved these human rights abuses?**

Only our leaders [KNU] protected us from danger and were our security guard. They attacked them [Tatmadaw] back whenever they met.

**For example, people said stop the fighting. Has anyone done this?**

There are some people who told [the Tatmadaw] to stop it [the fighting], but they did not obey or follow it.

**Since the 2012 preliminary ceasefire<sup>4</sup>, between the Burma/Myanmar government and KNU, what changes have happened [in your area]?**

Since the 2012 preliminary ceasefire, as the situation is better, I know that we can work [on our farms] for our livelihood. The other thing is that they [the Tatmadaw army] are in their place [army camp] and they do not come to [attack] us. Therefore, the situation is better and we can travel and work for our livelihood.

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<sup>4</sup> On January 12<sup>th</sup> 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Negotiations for a longer-term peace plan are still under way. For updates on the peace process, see the [KNU Stakeholder webpage](#) on the Myanmar Peace Monitor website. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014. In March 2015, the seventh round of the negotiations for a national ceasefire between the Burma/Myanmar government and various ethnic armed actors began in Yangon, see ["Seventh Round of Nationwide Ceasefire Negotiations," Karen National Union Headquarters](#), March 18<sup>th</sup> 2015. Following the negotiations, the KNU held a central standing committee emergency, see ["KNU: Emergency Meeting Called To Discuss Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement And Ethnic Leaders' Summit," Karen News](#), April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

**Have they [the Tatmadaw army] removed any army camps yet?**

No, they have not. Moreover, they want to upgrade [the army camps].

**What do you think the Tatmadaw army should do?**

We want the Tatmadaw army to be removed [from Karen State] and go back to their area. After they do that, [I believe that] it will be better [safer] for us. If they are not removed [from our area], we worry that [the fighting] will happen again, like we experienced in the past. This is our concern.

**What has been the root cause of the human rights abuses in your area?**

It has been the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) Army [Tatmadaw].

**For the young people and the future of your community, what do you want?**

I want [community] development in the future, in order to get freedoms, our own country [state] and our own land permanently. [Which means young people must] develop their education and knowledge. We want security to be safe, we want our own leaders [to lead us] and we want to have our own state. We want to have our own farms, to work for our livelihood.

**What are the biggest challenges facing your community's future?**

There is no challenge among us [in our community].

**How about food?**

Yes, we need food, health and prosperity. We need prosperity for our young people, to be able to live and work in the future.

**What should the government (KNU or Burma/Myanmar) do to make the situation better for people of your age?**

They should make peace and freedom, so we will be able to live peacefully in our own lands.

**Are the young people interested in leadership roles? Are they interested to work for their country and their nation?**

Yes, the young people who want to work for their country and for their nation have increased. They are interested in it [leadership roles].

**What do you want to be doing in five years' time? [For example,] you could do development work or take on leadership roles to help improve [the country].**

Starting from now, [looking] to the future, we [villagers] will protect the community reserved forests, rivers and our lands, and we will work to develop our communities as we are native [to this country].

**What do you know about the October 2015 ceasefire? What do you think about it? How is the ceasefire relevant to you?**

The ceasefire is related to us because in the past we fled and became displaced persons, but we do not have to flee after the ceasefire. The SPDC [Tatmadaw] do not come and [attack] us, so we can travel and work for our livelihood as the situation is better. If we have the situation like we currently have now in the future, we will be able to work for the future [development].

**What is your perspective and feeling on the peace process, of the Burma/Myanmar government and the ethnic armed organisations?**

If the peace process is genuine then I can accept it. I am concerned that [the Burma/Myanmar government] will not be honest and that they have targeted this peace process to create negative consequences [for the ethnic armed groups]. We are doubtful [about this peace process].

**Do you know any people in your area who have migrated to other countries or cities to find work? What do you think about this migration?**

There are some people from my area who migrated to other countries to find work.

**Do you think your community is developed in terms of: health and education, communication, transportation, living standards, administration?**

These have not been developed in my community yet, but I hope these will be developed in the future. If we have peace then communication, health and education, transportation, administration and then all of these things will be developed in our community.

**In which year do you think there were the most human rights abuses in the following dates (from 1992 until the present day)?**

The most human right abuses happened in 1998.

**Which [armed] grouped committed those human right abuses?**

SPDC<sup>5</sup>.

**What impact [human rights abuses] did the SPDC commit?**

They destroyed our businesses, stole our gold and money, destroyed our hill farms and plain farms; they heartlessly burnt down our paddy, and shot on sight our people and our villagers. Therefore we had to flee and could not work on our farms for our livelihood. Some villagers stepped on landmines, faced illnesses and faced food shortages. With the SPDC attacking us we had to survive in shelters in the wet season.

**Was there any yaba<sup>6</sup> [at that time]?**

No, there was no yaba.

**Do you know of any development projects that have happened in your village, community or areas?**

Yes.

**What are they? Did they benefit the community?**

Yes, they benefited the community because they have developed the land and plain farms, so they produce more food, like paddy, for the people in the community.

**What development project do they do?**

The do hill farming, plain farming and an agriculture project.

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<sup>5</sup> State Peace and Development Council of the military junta ruling Burma/Myanmar at the time. The SPDC followed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) which ruled from 1988 until its dissolution in 1997. The SPDC was officially dissolved March 30<sup>th</sup> 2011 by Senior General Than Shwe following the election of a quasi-civilian government in Burma/Myanmar in November 2010.

<sup>6</sup> *Yaba*, which means 'crazy medicine' in Thai, is a tablet form of methamphetamine. First developed in East Asia during the Second World War to enhance soldiers' performance, methamphetamine has become increasingly popular in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Burma/Myanmar where it is typically manufactured. See, [Yaba, the 'crazy medicine' of East Asia](#), UNODC, May 2008; "[Woman raped and killed in Pa'an District, October 2012](#)," KHRG, December 2012; and Chapter IV in [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response in Southeast Myanmar since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, June 2014.

**Do the villagers have to work or do they provide money?**

They provide materials so we can work on the farms.

**Who provides the farming materials?**

They are our leaders [KNU].

**Which administrators?**

Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN).

**What kind of material does [KESAN] provide?**

They provide machetes, grape hoes, shovels, watering cans and all of the other materials that we use on the plain farm and hill farm.

**Are the materials enough for the village [all the villagers]?**

Yes

**Do they provide farming materials for each villager, or do the villagers have to work together [on the farm]?**

We have to work together on the farm. At harvesting time, we store the paddy that we harvest together [in the same rice barn], and then we get some for ourselves. If we do not have enough food [paddy], then we can go and get more from it.[the rice barn]

**Do the villagers get free paddy [from the village rice barn]?**

The paddy [in the village rice barn] is ours, but if we take paddy from it then we have to return that amount of in the future [in the next harvest time]. We do this so the villagers do not have to get paddy from far away. It means we can get more paddy from the village rice barn [if we do not have enough paddy], and then we can work on our farm for a while [in the next season]. Then we have to give the paddy back [to the village rice barn] in the next harvest. It is not that we have to give the paddy back; it is that we store our paddy at the rice barn.

**Are all the villagers from your village area happy with this development project?**

Yes, all of them are happy with it.

**Do you have another project that you want?**

I want a project that can protect us and give us more knowledge of our work [on farm] for our livelihood. We want [our leaders] to look for more [development projects] for us.

**What should the government (Burma/Myanmar and KNU) do for the development of the community?**

They should develop the farms and businesses.

**Is there any transportation, business, commerce project for the villagers' livelihood? For example, stone mining, gold mining or any other jobs?**

They [KNU] have planned a project [gold mining], which they will do it in the future. They look for a way [to solve the villagers' livelihood problems], so the villagers will not be in any trouble/difficulty.

**Do you think these projects will benefit the villagers and civilians?**

Yes, I do. If the projects succeed, as our leaders [KNU] have planned, then I think it will benefit the villagers and civilians.

**Have the leaders or any companies planned any projects?**

Regarding what they [KNU] said it is our leaders' project. The local people will do the projects carefully without destroying the environment, or the villagers' lands and water. It is local people and leaders [who will do the project], so we will do it as much as we can. [If any issues/problems arise] we can have a meeting and discuss [the project] together.

**Have the Tatmadaw removed any army camps in your area [since the 2012 preliminary ceasefire]?**

No. Since the [2012 preliminary] ceasefire<sup>7</sup>, they have rebuilt their army camps instead of dismantling them.

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<sup>7</sup> On January 12<sup>th</sup> 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Negotiations for a longer-term peace plan are still under way. For updates on the peace process, see the [KNU Stakeholder webpage](#) on the Myanmar Peace Monitor website. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014. In March 2015, the seventh round of the negotiations for a national ceasefire between the Burma/Myanmar government and various ethnic armed actors began in Yangon, see

**What is the villagers' and civilians' perspective on the Tatmadaw camps [in your area]?**

They said “*We don’t understand why they [Myanmar government and KNU] signed the ceasefire but the Tatmadaw army does not go back to their area [remove from our area]*”. Regarding the ceasefire agreement, they want the Tatmadaw to go back to their place so they [the local people] can work and travel safely. Then the local people would not have to worry about their security.

**Do you want to report any other difficulties that you have faced?**

We want peace, so that we can travel and work freely in the future. We want our leaders [KNU] and the Tatmadaw to be honest about any projects. Any plans of the Tatmadaw should not be tricks and the plans of the [Tatmadaw] should be honest to our leaders [KNU].

**Do you have any other issues to report?**

As I mentioned above, we want peace. We will be happy if the Tatmadaw is honest.

**Thank you for providing information to us [KHRG].**

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)

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“[Seventh Round of Nationwide Ceasefire Negotiations](#),” *Karen National Union Headquarters*, March 18<sup>th</sup> 2015. Following the negotiations, the KNU held a central standing committee emergency, see “[KNU: Emergency Meeting Called To Discuss Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement And Ethnic Leaders’ Summit](#),” *Karen News*, April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2015.

# Mu Traw (Hpapun) District

