



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

June 25, 2018 / KHRG #18-24-A2-11

Dooplaya Interview: Saw G---, February 2018

The Interview with Saw G--- describes events that occurred in Win Yay Township, Dooplaya District, in February 2018. The celebration of Karen National Day was disrupted because the Tatmadaw did not allow for the statue of the Karen leader Saw Ba U Gyi to be publicly displayed.

- *Around 10,000 villagers participated in a procession to fetch the statue of the Karen leader Saw Ba U Gyi in H---village. They intended to carry the statue for it to be displayed during Karen National Day celebrations. However, the Tatmadaw Operations Commander from A'Nan Kwin village stopped them from erecting the statue. They insisted that erecting the statue would be a violation of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) Code of Conduct.*
 - *According to Saw G---, many villagers were unhappy with this situation. Saw G--- believes that the KNU did not do enough to protect the interests of the local community during this incident.*
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Interview | Saw G---, (male, 25), I--- village, Win Yay Township, Dooplaya District (February 2018)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Dooplaya District on February 5th 2018 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 Dooplaya District, including seven other interviews, one incident reports, one situation update, 112 photographs and 2 video clips.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Community worker

Position: Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) leader

Before we start the interview, would you have any questions about KHRG?

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.

I have one question. I want to know how KHRG uses our information to solve our problems.

At KHRG, we do not solve problems directly. We document villagers' perspectives on human rights violations. We then advocate on behalf of you to both domestic actors and the international community. We are promoting villagers' rights.

What is your name?

My name is Saw G---

How old are you?

I am 25 years old.

Where do you live?

I live in I--- village.

Which village tract, township and district do you live in?

My village is located in Noh Hpah Htaw village tract, Waw Ray (Win Yay) Township, Dooplaya District.

What is your religion?

I am Christian.

What is your occupation?

I am a community worker.

Are you married?

Yes, I am.

Do you have any children?

Yes, I have one child.

How old is your child?

My child is one year and six months old.

What community responsibilities do you have?

I am a leader of the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) in Waw Ray (Win Yay) Township.

How long have you been a KYO leader?

I nominated myself for the position of KYO leader [of Win Yay Township] in the KYO election of 2016. I did not get elected then. However, the winner of the 2016 election quit his position. Therefore, I became a KYO leader by default. I have been working as a KYO leader for only one year.

What information can you share about the events that occurred during the Karen National Day celebrations?

For the Karen National Day celebrations [on February 11th], we divided responsibilities among many different groups. The KYO was responsible for providing food for the event.

[Before the events of Karen National Day, we also wanted to display the statue of the Karen leader Saw Ba U Gyi]. On February 3rd 2018, we went to see the statue of our most admired president, Saw Ba U Gyi, in H--- village. We organised a procession to H--- village with around 10,000 villagers to take the statue of Saw Ba U Gyi [to the celebrations]. We went there happy, but nobody was happy on our way back home. [This is because we were not allowed to bring Saw Ba U Gyi's statue back with us.]

How many trucks did the villagers use as transportation when they went to pay homage to the statue of Saw Ba U Gyi?

We helped organise trucks for the people from our village. We counted how many villagers wanted to go and how many trucks we would need, stuff like that. However, we did not keep a written record of this information.

If you had to guess the number of the trucks?

I think that we used approximately 30 trucks as transportation. There were both big and small trucks.

Where did the statue of Saw Ba U Gyi initially come from?

The statue of Saw Ba U Gyi was made in Yangon. At first, the statue was supposed to be publicly displayed for civilians who came to celebrate the Karen New Year in the Three Pagoda Pass. However, this did not work out because the Tatmadaw forbid the public display of Saw Ba U Gyi's statue. Nevertheless, we still planned to display Saw Ba U Gyi's statue on Karen National Day so we went to H--- village to fetch the statue.

Can you tell us when Saw Ba U Gyi's statue was delivered to Win Yay Township?

The Saw Ba U Gyi statue was delivered to Win Yay Township on February 3rd 2018 1:00 PM sharp. However, because an issue arose, the statue was moved to another location at 6:30 PM.

You said that an issue arose. What kind of issue? Can you please explain it?

As everybody knows, after we went to fetch the statue in H--- village, the Tatmadaw Operations Commander from A'Nan Kwin village, I do not know his name, and ten soldiers were waiting at the [Win Yay] Township Office. They objected to us displaying the Saw Ba U Gyi statue. They referred to the NCA Code of Conduct and told us that we were not allowed to erect the statue.

The Tatmadaw said that they had received orders not to return [to their postings] until the statue was moved to another place. The [Tatmadaw] came back the next morning to consult with civilians about the issue regarding the Saw Ba U Gyi statue. However, because no civilians showed up, they went back.

How did the [KNU] leaders respond to this situation? Did they also refer to the NCA?

As far as I know, there was no response from the KNU. When I first saw the [Tatmadaw], I thought that they were invited [by the KNU leaders]. Later on, I learned that they were not invited. They just came without informing anyone.

How do you feel about this incident?

It really hurt me. We consoled ourselves. It is understandable that they did not allow us to erect the statue of Saw Ba U Gyi in town. So, we thought of moving the statue outside the Township Office – a place that is lower profile. However, we were unable to do so and many people were unhappy.

Many villagers still want to erect the statue of Saw Ba U Gyi. However, we cannot do it. Many people are questioning whether the KNU is considering their perspectives, or if they have power over the Tatmadaw. I understand that the KNU always takes the concerns of its civilians into consideration. However, these types of issues can damage the relationship between civilians and the KNU.

What does the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) think about this issue?

When we came to fetch the statue of Saw Ba U Gyi, soldiers from the KNLA were accompanying us. Honestly, the KNLA soldiers were not happy with the Tatmadaw's actions because they came into a KNU controlled area without giving them prior notification.

Do you think that the Karen National Day celebrations will still happen despite this issue?

Yes, why not. Even though our plans did not go smoothly because of the dispute regarding the statue of Saw Ba U Gyi, we will continue to organise events on Karen National Day.

As a KYO leader, what are your views on the Joint Monitoring Committee (JMC) established by the KNU and the Tatmadaw in 2015?

I think that the KNU does not have power over the Tatmadaw. It cannot defend against the Tatmadaw's actions. We have not seen the KNU take any appropriate actions to resolve the issue [of Saw Ba U Gyi's statue].

Moreover, the objection letter came from the Tatmadaw, not the KNU. I am not sure whether the KNU has a complaint mechanism. I feel like we do not have much power in the JMC.

Since the NCA was signed, there are more and more development and economic projects in the region. What do you think about that?

After the NCA [was signed], I have seen many development projects coming in [to this area]. However, there are political motives behind the development projects. Even though the projects have improved the local area, we continue to be treated unfairly and to be oppressed.

Would you like to add anything else?

No, this is enough.

Do you give us your permission to use this information and to take your photograph?

Yes.

Do you have any suggestions to KHRG?

Even though the NCA was signed, we [the Karen people] are still oppressed in various ways. We are happy to have KHRG come and document our experiences. We are looking forward to have KHRG [come and document] difficult situations.

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

- "Dooplaya Situation Update: Kyainseikgyi and Kyonedoe townships, November 2017 to January 2018," (February 2018)
- "Dooplaya Situation Update: Kyainseikgyi Township, July to August 2017," (December 2017)
- "Dooplaya Situation Update: Kawkareik Township, November 2016 to January 2017" (October 2017)
- "Dooplaya Interview: Saw A---, September 2016," (May 2017)
- "Dooplaya Situation Update: Kawkareik Township and Noh T'Kaw Township, April to May 2016," (March 2017)

