



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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**Interview**

May 16, 2018 / KHRG # 18-25-A2-11

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**Hpa-an Interview: F---, March 2018**

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*This Interview with F--- describes events occurring in Nabu Township, Hpa-an District, during the period between 2017 and 2018, including development and land confiscation.*

- *Villagers' land in Shwe Ko Ko Town was confiscated by the Chinese state-owned Jilin Yatai Company and the Border Guard Force (BGF) in order for them to implement a city expansion project along the Moei River bank from Shwe Ko Ko to Myawaddy.*
  - *According to F---, there were four to five houses that were destroyed by the company when the company built a concrete processing factory to build roads and buildings for their project. The individuals and families whose houses were destroyed were compensated.*
  - *The BGF held a consultation meeting with both affected land owners and community members whose lands would potentially be affected by the city expansion project on January 18<sup>th</sup> 2018, at Shwe Ko Ko monastery, regarding compensation.*
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**Interview | F---, (male, 40), Shwe Ko Ko Town, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District (March 2018)**

*The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Hpa-an District on March 10<sup>th</sup> 2018 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 Hpa-an District, including one other interview, one short update and 22 photographs.<sup>2</sup>*

**Ethnicity:** Karen

**Religion:** Buddhist

**Marital Status:** Single

**Occupation:** Daily labourer

**Position:** Villager

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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.

**On March 10<sup>th</sup> 2018, I met with a local villager in Shwe Ko Ko Town and interviewed him about land confiscation that took place to make way for a city expansion project.<sup>3</sup>**

**What is your name?**

My name is F---

**How old are you?**

I am 40 years old.

**What is your religion?**

I am Buddhist.

**What is your marital status?**

I am single.

**Where is your place of origin?**

My place of origin is Kaw Dan, Kyon Paing village tract, Kawkareik Township.

**Where do you currently live?**

I currently live in G---, Shwe Ko Ko Town, [Hpa-an District] Myawaddy District (Burma/Myanmar government recognized area).

**What position do you hold in your community?**

I am just a regular villager.

**What do you do for a living?**

I grew mushrooms in the past, but now I am a casual day labourer.

**What is happening in your village? What is the situation?**

Land confiscation is occurring in our area. Not only was my land confiscated, but also there are many people whose lands have been confiscated. Before land confiscation took place, I planned to sell my land to others, but I was informed [by the administration office] that I cannot sell it now because it is not my land anymore.

**So, to clarify, your land was confiscated?**

Yes, my land was confiscated. I bought this land and obtained a land document, which was kept in [Shwe Ko Ko administration] office. When I was about to sell my land, however, I was told that I cannot sell it.

**Do you know why you cannot sell your own land?**

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.mmtimes.com/news/border-guards-plan-city-extension-project-chinese-firm.html>;  
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/bgf-plans-large-city-expansion-project-karen-state.html>

I cannot sell it because they already confiscated my land.

**Who confiscated your land?**

A Chinese company.<sup>4</sup>

**Only a Chinese company confiscated your land? Were there any other groups involved?**

I do not know about any others. A few months ago, I was about to pawn the land to my younger sister. When I went to the [Shwe Ko Ko] administration office to obtain the documents regarding land ownership, I was told that my land had already been confiscated and I cannot do anything with it.

**Do you know what the land has been confiscated for? What will they do with the land?**

They [BGF authorities] said that [Chinese] company will come and conduct a project.

**What kind of project will they implement with this confiscated land?**

Actually, we do not know exactly what the project will be. In the last consultation meeting, they [BGF] said that the company will establish workplaces so that villagers do not have to farm anymore and they can get jobs and live well. As far as I see, they have only built a concrete processing plant. Now they are in the process of building many apartments beginning from the former TB clinic to Kyaw Lah Gate [a BGF checkpoint located in the Moei River bank]. The apartments are significantly bigger than apartments I have seen in Bangkok City. I have regularly been to the construction site because I send some materials there.

**What are the [apartment] buildings for?**

I am not sure what they are for. I only go there and send materials, such as bricks.

**You said they [the BGF] held a consultation meeting and told the villagers that the project will be beneficial to them as it will provide job opportunities for local people. Do you remember when they held the consultation meeting?**

I cannot remember the date, but I remember the place. The consultation meeting was held in Shwe Ko Ko monastery. They met with villagers not only once, but three to four times.

**Can you tell me at least the year and the season that the first consultation was held?**

The first consultation was held in 2017, I think.

**What about the last consultation meeting?**

I did not attend the last meeting. It was held recently [on January 18<sup>th</sup> 2018]. I did not want to attend meetings anymore because they repeated the same thing.

**What do you mean by “they repeated the same thing”?**

I mean like they [the BGF] say again and again how the project will benefit the local people in terms of local development.

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<sup>4</sup> This villager is referring to [Jilin Yatai Group Co. Ltd.](#) that is based in Changchun, Chilin, China. The group owns businesses in the building materials, pharmaceutical, finance, real estate, coal, and trade industries.

**Another villager:** In the first consultation meeting, we were informed that the Chinese company will come to establish workplaces for us. Mostly, people from here do not have jobs, so people that do not have a job will get jobs. They [BGF] told us something different in the last consultation meeting, however. They said that the project will affect our lands, but we will be compensated the value of land. Each acre of villagers' land will be compensated for 50,000 baht [\$37.94 US].<sup>5</sup> In the past, my land was 6.5 acres wide, but I sold some of it and I am now left with 4.5 acres of land. I was told that my land [4.5 acres] cannot be sold to other villagers anymore because the Chinese company will use it for their project. They [BGF] asked the land owners who were at the consultation meeting, "Do you agree to be compensated 50,000 baht [\$37.94 US] per acre of land?" At that time, no one dared to answer them [because they are military]. How can we agree with the amount of compensation that they want to provide us? We can build four houses on an acre of land. You would not agree with that amount of compensation, would you? We would consider compensation from them if they offered 150,000 baht [\$113.81 US] per acre. But, it does not work like that. They said that land owners will be paid 50,000 baht [\$37.94 US] per acre. We did not dare to argue with them, so we just came back after the meeting.

### **How many times have the Chinese company met with land owners?**

They have never met with us. Only BGF soldiers who are representatives of Bo Chit Thu<sup>6</sup> have met with us.

### **So, how many times did they meet with villagers?**

I do not remember.

### **Does the project affect you? How?**

Yes, my land has been confiscated, which I discovered because when I asked them [the administration office] to give me land sale documents, they did not provide me with them. Even though the project does not reach my land, I know that my land has already been confiscated. They did not inform me prior to confiscating my land. I just knew it when they did not sign on the land documents for buying and selling land. When I bought the land from them [the local authorities/BGF] in the past, they signed it.

### **So, you mean that now they can come to take your land anytime?**

Yes, that's right. Due to the current situation, however, before they enter here we can still live and work here.

### **What are the advantages from the project?**

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<sup>5</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the April 18<sup>th</sup> 2018 official market rate of 31.25 baht to US \$1.

<sup>6</sup> Maung Chit Thu, commonly referred to Chit Thu, was the operations commander of Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) Battalion #999 prior to the DKBA transformation into the Tatmadaw Border Guard Force, which began in September 2010. His role has grown considerably since the transformation: he was second in command of Tatmadaw Border Guard Forces, overseeing battalions #1017, #1018, #1019 and #1012, and is now senior advisor and general secretary of the Karen State BGF central command based in Ko Ko, Hpa-an District. Abuses committed by Maung Chit Thu have been cited in previous KHRG reports, including ordering the forcible relocation of villagers from eight villages in Lu Pleh Township in July 2011, while acting Border Guard commander; see "Foundation of Fear," KHRG, 2017, "Pa'an Situation Update: June to August 2011," KHRG, October 2011.

I still do not see any advantages. I worked as a security guard at their project site but because they paid me irregularly, I quit that job and now do casual jobs.

**What are the disadvantages from the project?**

As I have told you, our land was confiscated to make way for the project.

**How much of your land has been confiscated?**

Two plots of my land, which are 60 feet by 80 feet each, have been confiscated.

**Does the project reach your land?**

Not yet, but it comes near my land.

**Do the development actors who implement the project include only Chinese? Are there any other actors involved?**

I do not know whether other people are involved in the project or not, but I am sure that the Chinese are definitely involved. If you don't believe it, you can go and see the project. There are lots of Chinese there.

**Regarding land confiscation, in what ways did you act to protect your land? What actions did you take? For example, did you write up complaint letters and report the situation to local authorities?**

Regarding land confiscation, some people reported the case but I did not, because if you compare my land with other villagers' lands, my land is just a small area. For some people, they have a huge amount of land that has been confiscated.

**You said some people did act against the project? What actions did they take?**

They verbally reported the case [land confiscation] to Bo Chit Thu. The people, who live here, especially farmers, cannot read or write, so they just reported verbally.

**How did the villagers overcome challenges and difficulties? What kinds of problems did they face when they reported about land confiscation?**

I don't know about that. I just know that villagers were not satisfied with the land confiscation.

**So, how did Chit Thu or the Chinese company respond to villagers when villagers reported about land confiscation?**

In the previous meeting, a relevant BGF officer or soldier told us that Bo Chit Thu was not here, so we had to wait [until he returned to Shwe Ko Ko] to have our problem solved. Even after Bo Chit Thu returned to Shwe Ko Ko, however, he did not do anything for us.

**What kinds of strategies did villagers use before the project was implemented?**

I did not see anything. For the houses that were destroyed by the project, the affected villagers bought a new house with the compensated money [after the project took place].

**What challenges do you face due to the project?**

Now, I do not worry much about it. I feel like it is enough for me as a civilian that they create job opportunities for us.

**Previously, you said that there are many other villagers' lands that have also been confiscated. Do you know how many villagers have been affected by land confiscation?**

There are too many people to count. We heard that the project will be conducted from here all the way to Myawaddy City [so all of the villagers who live between these two places will be affected].

**As you are a local person, can you please estimate how many people would be affected by the project?**

Too many. I do not know how to estimate.

**Do you know how many acres of land are or will be affected?**

I do not know. I am sure that many acres of land will be affected.

**Ok, what about in Shwe Ko Ko area? How many people have been affected?**

There are around 10 [parcels of] villagers' lands in the area where they [the Chinese company] built a concrete processing plant. On the land on the opposite side of the concrete processing factory, they used bulldozers or tractors for levelling the land and they will construct a building on it. People who had their houses destroyed were compensated and people who had only their lands [but not houses] confiscated or destroyed have not been compensated yet.

**Do you know how many people's houses were destroyed?**

There were around four to five houses that were destroyed. Regarding land confiscation, I just know that in this area [Section #3] there are 11 [parcels of] people's lands that have been confiscated.

**Were the home owners ok with their houses being destroyed?**

I think so, because they received compensation. The compensation was provided based on the quality of each house. If the house was still good and big, they compensated 150,000 baht [\$4,800 US] and they provided 100,000 baht [\$3,201 US] for a small house.

**We know that houses are built on the land. So, did they [the company] only provide compensation for the houses that were destroyed, or did they also compensate for the land where the destroyed houses were located?**

No, they did not provide compensation for the land. But the homeowners were told that the land would be compensated later by Bo Chit Thu.

**Is the place where houses were destroyed far from here?**

It is not that far from here. I think it [the project] will come here soon. At first, I thought that I would break down this hut, but when I see this situation, I don't want to break it anymore until the project reaches here.

**So, you mean that you will not receive anything [compensation] if you break down your hut earlier?**

Yes. Previously, I also grew mushrooms and I had two to three mushroom storages [units]. I first came here with the purpose of growing and selling mushrooms. When I knew this area would potentially be confiscated, however, I stopped growing mushrooms. Now, I keep my hut without breaking it down because I expect that I will be provided compensation [for it] when the project reaches my land. I will be able to build a new house with the compensation.

**You said there are 11 [parcels of] people's lands in your area [only in G---] that are affected by the project? Are they included in the ones whose houses were broken down?**

No, all of the 11 people previously mentioned are farmers that only had their lands affected by the project.

**So, you mean that the affected lands are not only plantations or farmlands, but also include plots of land owned by people in town?**

Yes, you are right.

**Do you know how many plots of land are affected?**

Too many to count.

**What are your perspectives on this project? How do you feel about it?**

I do not feel anything about it. But, I know that one day this area will become a [big] city for sure. It will be great if the project can provide employment opportunities for local people here.

**What do you want to say about land and the farmers who are affected by the project?**

It is not only me who is facing problems. There are both farmers and regular people who are facing similar issues. We want to sell our land, but we cannot sell it now. We were told that our land will be compensated or replaced. But, we want to know clearly when they will provide compensation and where the land will be replaced.

**Another villager:** We are just happy to live in our own place. We do not want to go and stay on the land they will give us. One of the affected land owners said, "I will not be happy if you give me your wife for me to stay with. Likewise, you also will not be happy if I give you my wife to stay with."

**What are your recommendations for the development or project actors?**

In the past, I was able to run a small business by growing mushrooms. Since the project came, however, I stopped working on growing mushrooms and I also broke down all of the mushroom storage [units], because I knew my land would potentially be confiscated. Now, in order to start working on a new business, we need investments. So, the quicker they [development actors] provide compensation, the better it will be for us to secure our livelihoods. This is not only my situation; many other people also need compensation.

**Are you still working on growing mushrooms?**

I started growing mushrooms since I arrived here in 2013. I stopped working on it [in 2017] because if the project reaches up to my land unexpectedly, all of the mushrooms will be wasted and I will lose my business. We are waiting to see the situation and when they will come to our land.

**What do you want to say, or is there more you would like to add?**

I would like to say to the company who conducts this project to please consider and prioritise local people who are affected by the project.

**Thank you so much for your time.**



This photo was taken on March 10<sup>th</sup> 2018 in Shwe Ko Ko Town, T’Nay Hsah (Nabu) Township, Hpa-an District. The photo shows a forty-year-old man, F---, who was interviewed about his concerns in regards to the city expansion project that is being conducted by Jilin Yatai Company in Shwe Ko Ko Town. His land has been confiscated by Bo Chit Thu, who is working with the company on the project. He said that according to BGF leaders, the confiscated land will be compensated or replaced with land in another area, but he does not know when and where the land will be replaced. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This photo was taken on March 10<sup>th</sup> 2018 in Shwe Ko Ko Town, T’Nay Hsah (Nabu) Township, Hpa-an District. The photo shows a concrete processing building that was built on villagers’ lands. The land was confiscated by the BGF and Jilin Yatai company. Villagers said that some of the confiscated lands will be compensated between 30,000 baht [\$960 US] and 50,000 baht [\$1,600 US] or replaced with land in other areas. The houses that were destroyed by the project were compensated based on the quality of the houses, for example, a high quality or large house was compensated for 100,000 baht [\$3,200 US] to 150,000 baht [\$4,801 US]. *[Photo: KHRG]*

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

- “Hpa-an Situation Update: Paingkyon Township, Hlaingbwe Township and Nabu Township, November 2016 to October 2017,” (March 2018)
- “Hpa-an Situation Update: Hlaingbwe Township, Paingkyon Township and Nabu township, March to May 2017,” (August 2017)
- “Three separate killing incidents based on witchcraft suspicion in Hpa-an District,” (July 2017)
- “Hpa-an Interview: Naw A---, September 25, 2016,” (July 2017)
- “Hpa-an Short Update: Hlaingbwe Township, March to October 2016,” (April 2017)

# Hpa-an District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)