



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

November 12, 2018 / KHRG #18-45-A3-I1

Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Arbitrary taxation by the Tatmadaw causes livelihood challenges for local communities

A local villager describes incidents of arbitrary taxation and forced labour by the Tatmadaw that occurred in April 2018 in Ler Muh Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District.

- *Arbitrary taxes levied by the Tatmadaw have caused difficulties for local communities who depend on logging for their livelihoods.*
- *The Tatmadaw forced local community members to help them with transportation logistics. This type of forced labour causes difficulties for local people.*

Interview | Saw P---, (male, 46), L--- village, Ler Muh Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District (April 2018)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Mergui-Tavoy District on April 21st 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 Mergui-Tavoy District, including 7 other interviews and 81 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Logging

What is your name?

My name is Saw P---.

How old are you?

I am 46 years old.

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.

Are you married?

Yes, I am married and I have three children.

Where do you live?

I live in L--- village, Toh Teh Htah village tract, Ler Muh Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District.

What is your occupation?

I have previously worked in logging, but currently, I do not work.

Are any armed groups based near your village?

Yes, a Tatmadaw army camp is based in my village.

How many Tatmadaw soldiers are based near your village?

I know there are 30 soldiers for each command unit, and about 40 to 50 soldiers in each battalion.

Do they engage in any military activities?

They patrol in the village, in the forest and around the nearby river.

Are there any security threats to the women in your community?

The Tatmadaw soldiers have not committed any sexual assaults on the women in the village.

Are there any human rights abuses in your community?

I would like to share a human rights violation related to my work in logging. One of the challenges I face in my work is arbitrary tax collection by armed groups.

The Tatmadaw and the Karen National Union (KNU) collect taxes from civilians who log the forest. The taxes levied by the KNU are reasonable. They collect 10% of the profits of each individual as taxation. For instance, they collect 30,000 kyat (US \$18.96) as a tax if an individual makes a 300,000 kyat (US \$189.62) profit.³ We believe that the KNU tax collection is fair.

The taxes levied by the Tatmadaw seem arbitrary to us because they are not related to profit. The Tatmadaw requires that each person pays 100,000 kyat (US\$ 63.21) in tax when they log up to one ton of wood. I am not sure whether the Tatmadaw have the right to collect a large amount of taxes. I feel that the Tatmadaw's taxes are arbitrary. They are not in line with their mandate, and are more akin to corruption. Because of this, many community members who worked in logging have given up their work, myself included. Currently, there is only one villager left who is doing logging, Saw K---. The Tatmadaw's arbitrary tax collection is a challenge for him. He is trying to stay away from the Tatmadaw.

Which Tatmadaw battalion is collecting taxes from loggers?

I do not know the battalion number. I know that this Tatmadaw battalion is led by the G2 [Intelligence officer] Ngway To Shway.

Are the Tatmadaw causing any other challenges to the local community?

Local people are concerned that the Tatmadaw keeps a record of community members who travel through their checkpoint.

I also heard that the Tatmadaw collected taxes from a villager here. When did this happen?

³ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the November 2018 official market rate of 1582.08 kyat to US \$1.

The most recent case happened in March 2018. They collected taxes from him, but I do not know if they sent it to their headquarters or spent it themselves.

Are there any human rights abuses, like forced labour, happening in this area?

Yes, there have been incidents of forced labour. The Tatmadaw often gives orders to community members to arrange for their transportation. For example, they gave an order to local people to arrange transportation for them, requisitioning ten motorbikes or five boats. This can be challenging for us because it can be difficult to find the number of motorbikes or boats for them. Sometimes, local people are working or travelling, it is not easy for them to abandon their work. In this case, we asked the Tatmadaw to give us some more time, but they did not consider our request.

What are your perspectives on the Tatmadaw’s activities?

I think that it is inappropriate to treat civilian populations like this.

How do you feel about this?

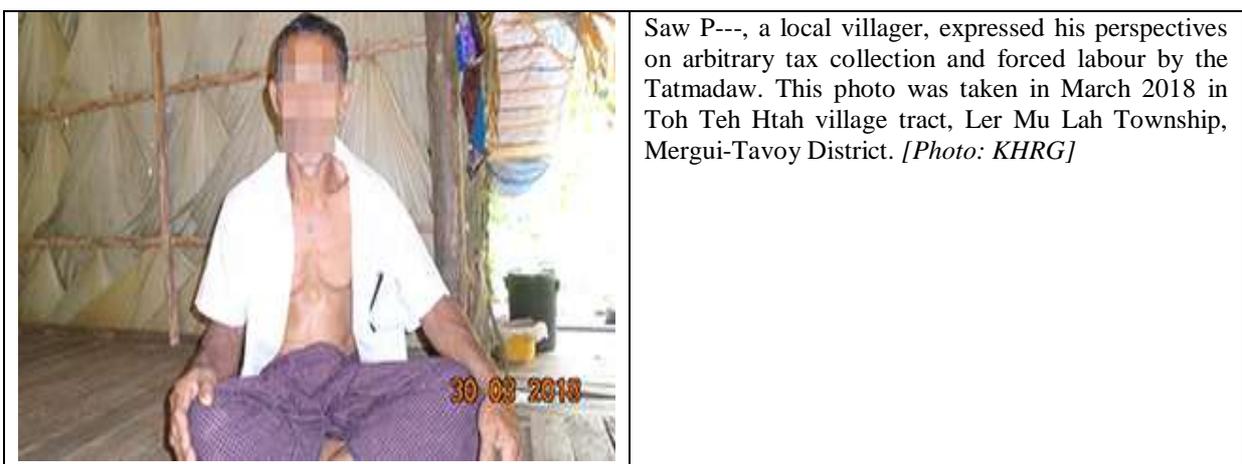
We do not like being subjected to the Tatmadaw’s activities. However, because we are villagers, we have no authority to stop this. We think that the KNU and the KNLA (Karen National Liberation Army) are more capable to address this issue. They should raise this issue with the Tatmadaw because both of them signed the National Ceasefire Agreement (NCA).

Do you think the Tatmadaw and the KNU have followed the NCA Code of Conduct and maintained peace?

I believe that that Tatmadaw are still abusing their power and putting a lot of pressure on local populations.

Who do you think is responsible for resolving the issues arising in your village?

I think that the authorities responsible are the Burma/Myanmar government, and the KNU. Community members should be involved in solving local issues so that the process can be democratic. However, we want the KNU to be accountable for resolving local issues because we are Karen.



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

- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: K’Ser Doh and Ler Muh Lah townships, December 2017 to February 2018”, (July 2018)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Field Report: Growing concerns about land confiscations and development-related abuses, January 2016 to December 2017”, (July 2018)

- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ler Doh Soh Township, October 2016 to October 2017”, (June 2018)
- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ler Doh Soh Township and K’Ser Doh Township, February to April 2017,” (February 2018)

Mergui/Tavoy (Thanintharyi) District



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