



News Bulletin

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Tenasserim Interview: Saw K---, August 2011

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted by a KHRG researcher in August 2011. The KHRG researcher interviewed Saw K---, a 30-year-old medic with the Backpack Health Worker Team (BPHWT), an organisation that provides health care and medical assistance to displaced civilians inside Burma. Saw K--- described witnessing a joint attack by Tatmadaw soldiers from three different battalions on a civilian settlement in Ma No Roh village tract, Te Naw Th’Ri Township, Tenasserim Division in January 2011. Saw K--- reported that mortars were fired into P--- village, causing residents and Saw K---, who was providing healthcare support in P--- village at that time, to flee. Saw K--- reported that Tatmadaw soldiers subsequently entered P--- village and burned down 17 houses, as well as rice barns and food stores belonging to villagers, before planting landmines in the village. According to Saw K---, the residents of P--- have not returned to their homes, and have been unable to coordinate to restart the school that was abandoned in P--- because most households now live at dispersed sites in the area.

Interview | Saw K--- (male, 30), Backpack (BPHWT) medic, (August 2011)

The following interview was conducted by a KHRG researcher. It is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹

Ethnicity: Karen

Occupation: Backpack (BPHWT) medic

Thara,² could you tell me about the situation, as I want to know about who burned down the IDP (internally displaced persons) village, when it happened, and as much other detailed information as you can?

It happened when I was staying at P--- village [IDP hiding site] and looking after patients. The SPDC Army [Tatmadaw]³ soldiers came and fired mortars at the place we stayed. At

¹ When conducting interviews, KHRG researchers 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. KHRG’s most recent analysis of the situation in Tenasserim Division can be found in the recent Field Report, “Militarization, Development and Displacement: Conditions for villagers in southern Tenasserim Division,” KHRG, March 2010.

² *Thara* is a Karen term used for a teacher, pastor, or any person to whom the speaker wishes to show respect. The interviewer uses this phrase throughout this interview when speaking to the interviewee.

³ In Karen, the Burmese phrases *Na Ah Pa* (SPDC) and *Na Wa Ta* (SLORC) are commonly used to refer to the Burmese government or to Burma’s state army, the Tatmadaw. Many older Karen villagers who were accustomed to using the phrase *Na Wa Ta* (SLORC) before 1997 continue to use that phrase, even though the SLORC has not officially existed since 1997. Similarly, despite the official dissolution of the SPDC in

that time, during the mortar attack, we all ran up to the mountain, including the children. While we were running, KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] soldiers who were nearby received the information that the SPDC Army soldiers had come [to P--- village], and so they came back [to the area]. When we arrived at the top of the mountain, there was fighting in the village because the KNLA soldiers had come back. When the [Tatmadaw] soldiers attacked and we ran away, the SPDC Army soldiers came and burned down the villagers' houses and rice barns in P---.

Do you know what the SPDC Army soldiers' battalion number was, *Thara*?

I noticed one battalion was #224. I noted down another battalion in my notebook, but I didn't bring it [with me]. If you want to know it, I can check later. There was also another one, Battalion #349.

Do you remember the date that they came and burned down the village?

They burned it down on the 27th. I've noted this down in my notebook, but I didn't dare to bring it [with me now].

Do you remember the month?

It was January.

Of this year, 2011?

In January 2011. It was on the 27th [I think], but I'm not sure. If you want to be sure, I can check it.

Did all the villagers leave?

They all ran up the mountain.

How many households were there in the village [at P---]?

Altogether, there were over 30 households.

How many schools did the village have?

It had only one school.

Was it a primary, middle or high school?

It was a middle school.

How many grades did the school have?

It went up to grade five or grade six, but it was a middle school.

Do you know how many students the school had?

March 2011, many Karen villagers continue to use the phrase *Na Ah Pa* (SPDC) to refer to the Burmese government or to the Tatmadaw; see: "Mission Accomplished as SPDC 'dissolved'," Myanmar Times, April 4-10 2011. The term *Na Ah Pa* was used by the interviewer and interviewee, and "SPDC" is therefore retained in the translation of this interview.

I don't know because I didn't note this down as it [the school] was connected to the KED [Karen Education Department].

Did the SPDC Army soldiers come to the village [at P---] and burn it down it or did they shell it with mortars?

They shelled the village with mortars, and when the mortar shells fell we were shocked and ran away with nothing [without possessions]. At that time, they [Tatmadaw soldiers] entered and burned the village. The KNLA soldiers heard about this, came back, and began fighting the SPDC Army soldiers.

Did the villagers dare to go back to the village [at P--- after this attack]?

They didn't dare to go back.

So the school and village still remain like that [burned and abandoned]?

They remain like that because the fires burned all the houses down.

Did the SPDC Army soldiers burn down all the houses?

The SPDC Army soldiers didn't burn them all. They burned 17 houses.

Did they burn the school?

They didn't burn the school because the school was on [exposed] flat ground and there was fighting [taking place], so the SPDC Army soldiers didn't dare to go near the school. [The school] wasn't near the houses. It was on flat ground and it wasn't easy to burn during the fighting. They didn't dare to burn it because the KLNA soldiers would have shot them.

How do you know this information?

I stayed there [at P---].

So you saw these things happen?

I suffered them myself. I had to run and pull the children up the mountain.

Did you also stay in the village at P---?

Yes, I looked after patients there.

So it happened when you looked after patients in that village?

Yes.

So this place was P---?

Yes, it was P--- [an IDP hiding site].

Do you know which village tract or township the village was in?

Yes.

Could you tell me?

Mergui-Tavoy District [Tenasserim Division], Te Naw Th'Ri Township.

How about the village tract?

It was in Ma No Roh village tract.

So the villagers didn't dare to go back to P---?

Yes, they didn't dare to go back.

Did the SPDC Army soldiers stay in the village for a long time?

Yes, nearly a week.

In the village itself?

Yes, we hid for nearly a month. They stayed in the village for about a week, and they stayed near the village for a month, so we had to hide for a month.

If I report these events, can I say that *Thara* is a Backpack (BPHWT) medic?

Yes, a Backpack (BPHWT) medic.

Did *Thara* live in P---? Or did *Thara* just go and provide medicines?

Yes, I don't live there. I just travel around.

The school went up to grade six?

Yes.

How many teachers did the school have?

Now, the teachers were Tharamu G---, Tharamu P---, Tharamu W--- and another one, [but] I don't know her name. In all, there were four teachers.

Did they have a clinic in the village?

No, they didn't have a clinic, only Backpack medics who would come around.

How old are you?

Thirty years old.

***Thara*, do you have anything else that you want to report about a school or clinic burning?**

I don't have anything else to report, but now the villagers don't stay there [at P---] and there's also no school. I couldn't continue [providing health awareness] training because people started living separately [in hiding]. Some stay here and some stay there, so it hasn't been easy to build up a [new] school. At this time, they can do nothing.

Where did the villagers resettle? Did they stay separately like that?

They stayed separately like that. They stayed around there [by the old village].

There's no school?

They don't have a school. You can't see if anything's there, because it's all [overgrown with] bushes.

There are bushes in the village?

Yes, it's all bushes. Even I was afraid to go.

Are the SPDC Army soldiers still active there, in the area?

They stayed for only one month because they suffered a lot of injuries fighting.

The SPDC Army soldiers who burned the village [suffered injuries]?

Yes, those SPDC Army soldiers. Now they've all gone back. The KNLA soldiers said they [the Tatmadaw soldiers] had been shot and suffered a lot of injuries, so they'd gone back.

After they went back, didn't the villagers go back [to the village]?

They didn't dare to go back because the SPDC Army soldiers had placed landmines. Even me, I didn't dare to go back.

So the SPDC Army soldiers placed landmines in the village?

Yes, they placed landmines.

Who told you this?

We heard the [KNLA] soldiers say this.

Did the KNLA soldiers return to and inspect the village?

Yes, the KNLA soldiers returned and inspected the village because fighting had happened there and the [KNLA] soldiers stayed active in the area. The soldiers notified us not to go back because the SPDC Army soldiers had placed landmines.

So the villagers didn't dare to go back?

Yes, they didn't dare to go back.

Did the KNLA soldiers inspect the village after the fighting?

Yes, the [KNLA] soldiers stayed active there. As for us, we'd already run away.

Further background on the military situation in Tenasserim Division can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- "Tenasserim Interview: Saw C---, Received in May 2011," KHRG, September 2011
- *Militarization, Development and Displacement: Conditions for villagers in southern*

Tenasserim Division, (March 2011)

- *Living conditions for displaced villagers and ongoing abuses in Tenasserim Division (October 2009)*
- *A strategy of subjugation: The situation in Ler Mu Lah Township, Tenasserim Division (December 2001)*
- *Freefire zones in southern Tenasserim (August 1997)*
- *Tenasserim Division: Forced Relocation and Forced Labour (February 1997)*
- *Relocations in the gas pipeline area (April 1997)*

