



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

October 1, 2011 / KHRG #2011-B33

Tenasserim Interview: Saw P---, Received in May 2011

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted during May 2011 in Te Naw Th’Ri Township, Tenasserim Division by a villager trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The villager interviewed Saw P---, the 36-year-old head of a village in which Tatmadaw soldiers maintain a continuous presence. Saw P--- described the disappearance of a male villager who has not been seen since February 2010 when he was arrested by Tatmadaw soldiers as he was returning from his hill plantation, on suspicion of supplying food assistance to Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) troops. Saw P--- also described human rights abuses and livelihoods difficulties faced regularly by villagers, including: forced labour, specifically road construction and maintenance; taxation and demands for food and money; theft of livestock; and movement restrictions, specifically the imposition of road tolls for motorbikes and the prohibition against travel to villagers’ agricultural workplaces, resulting in the destruction of crops by animals. Saw P--- also expressed concerns about disruption of children’s education caused by the periodic commandeering of the village school and its use as a barracks by Tatmadaw soldiers. He explained how villagers respond to abuses and livelihoods challenges by avoiding Tatmadaw soldiers, harvesting communally, sharing food supplies and inquiring at the local jail to investigate the disappearance of a fellow villager.

Interview | Saw P--- (male, 36), Ky--- village tract, Te Naw Th’Ri Township, Tenasserim Division (May 2011)

The following interview was conducted by a villager in Tenasserim Division who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. It 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 Tenasserim Division, including 21 other interviews.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Owner of betelnut hill plantation

Position: VPDC village head

¹ KHRG trains villagers in eastern Burma 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, villagers 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 When these documents have been processed and translated by KHRG and when sufficient information has been compiled and analysed, a full Field Report on the situation in Tenasserim Division will be available on the KHRG website. Until then, 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 2011

How many children do you have?

I have four children.

How old is your oldest child?

My oldest child is 13 years old.

How old is your youngest child?

My youngest child is seven years old.

How long have you fulfilled the village head's responsibilities?

I've fulfilled the responsibilities as village head for about five years already.

What are the village head's duties?

My duties are to follow the orders from the local SPDC Army [Tatmadaw] soldiers³ and their demands for food and money, provision of livestock, like chickens and pigs, and also porters, and to send them to the H--- Township office, the SPDC office and the VPDC office. These are my duties.

What is [the title of] your position?

My position is VPDC [Village Peace and Development Council] village head.

Who elected you to be village head?

I didn't want to be village head myself and the villagers also didn't vote for me, but the VDPC leaders [public officials] came and appointed me.

What has been your experience as village head?

When the SPDC Army soldiers come, I have to go and answer their [questions], and when the Operations Commanders come, I have to stay with [accompany] them everywhere. When the patrolling army units come, they summon me because they don't trust the [other] villagers, so I have to go with them. These patrolling army units, they hide in the jungle for a week or so. And, they call me to the Township office and ask me about the village situation, the KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] situation and many different kinds of things about our village, like: *'Are any of the villagers in contact with the KNLA,, sending pictures to the KNLA or sending news about internally displaced people to the KNLA?'* I always have to face the SPDC Army soldiers, patrolling army units and the Operations Commanders when they come to the village and question me a lot, and I have to be the guarantor for all the villagers.

What is your village's name?

³ In Karen, the Burmese phrases *Na Wa Ta* (SLORC) and *Na Ah Pa* (SPDC) 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 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.

My village's name is N--- *ywa thit* ['new village', a term used to refer to a relocation site].

How many households does it have?

There are [*number censored for security*] households.

How many villagers does it have?

There are [*number censored for security*] villagers.

What are the villagers' occupations?

The villagers farm hill fields.

Do the villagers have enough food?

My villagers are very poor and they don't have enough food. Some villagers have to farm far away from the village. When the SPDC Army soldiers come to the village, they don't allow the villagers to go outside the village, and the villagers don't have time to go [to their own workplaces] because they have to do forced labour. Their rice fields have no one looking after them, so the buffalo come and eat them and destroy the rice fields. This year the villagers will suffer more than last year because they [Tamadaw and KNLA] had battles in the summertime [dry season, November through February] and the villagers didn't dare to farm so the animals came and ate the rice fields. When they harvested the paddy, they got only ten or 20 baskets (209 kg. / 460.8 lb. or 418 kg. / 921.6 lb.) total, and some didn't get enough food and will have to take odd jobs for daily wages.

What do the villagers who don't have enough [food] do?

The villagers who don't have enough food help people clear their fields of grass for planting, and help other people pound [thresh] the rice. They collect vegetables and eat them plain for their daily meals.

Do the villagers have an income?

They don't have any income because they are very poor. Only some villagers sell *brinjals* [aubergines] and they get some money, but not enough for everyone. Some villagers are pastoralists, raising pigs and chickens for a living. We face a lot of problems and I could never describe them all.

Do SPDC Army [Tatmadaw] soldiers come to your village?

Yes, don't even ask if the SPDC Army soldiers come because, you know, they're based in our village. We have an army camp and also we have a police camp. There are SPDC Army soldiers based in my village all year long. They never leave and we have to feed them all the time.

Do you remember when they came and started to base at the army camp [in your village]?

They came in 2003 and they've never moved from our village. The police have since imposed a motorbike toll for villagers riding through the police checkpoint.

What have the soldiers in your village done?

The soldiers in my village have stolen the villagers' ducks, pigs, chickens, cats and dogs. When they can't find anything to steal, they shoot and eat the livestock villagers are raising. The villagers don't dare say anything and just have to let them do this.

They've done many things to the villagers.

Yes, they've done many things to the villagers, but I mention only some of the things to you now. I don't dare to mention everything now because I'm afraid of them [the Tatmadaw soldiers].

We're talking secretly and you're still afraid?

I don't know. Someone might hear when we are talking, so I'm afraid.

Do they pay for the livestock they take from villagers?

For livestock, it's hard to say that they pay for them because for every ten times they've taken them they only paid for them once. They paid this villager only 1,000 kyat or 1,100 kyat (US \$1.23 or \$1.35 respectively).⁴

Have the SPDC Army soldiers killed any villagers?

Before, the SPDC Army soldiers killed one of the villagers.

What was the villager's name who was killed by the SPDC Army soldiers?

His name was Saw A---.

When did it happen?

It happened in February 2010.

Can you tell us, why did they kill him?

This villager was coming back from his workplace on a plantation and he encountered [Tatmadaw] LIB [Light Infantry Battalion] #559. When he came back he brought vegetables with him and the soldiers stopped and asked him: '*Where are you coming back from?*' The villager said: '*I'm coming back from my plantation site,*' but the SPDC Army soldiers didn't believe him. The SPDC Army soldiers said: '*You brought food to the people who're hiding in the jungle [KLNA] and we don't believe you.*' The soldiers said: '*We don't believe you and we have to interrogate you a little bit,*' so they took him with them. When on the day the SPDC Army soldiers took him and no one saw him, we went and looked for him in the town jail, but we didn't see him anymore, so everyone thinks he has died and many people have looked for him but no one's seen him again. So we think he has been killed.

Do you ever run from the SPDC Army soldiers?

No, how can I run once the SPDC Army soldiers are in my village? But sometimes, if I see them coming from far away, I run away for a few hours, but never for the whole day.

⁴ All conversion estimates for the Kyat in this interview are based on the fluctuating informal exchange rate rather than the government's official fixed rate of 6.5 kyat to US \$1. As of September 27th 2011, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 815 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

Do you have to porter for the SPDC Army soldiers?

I never porter for them, but I have to follow [accompany] them from place to place very often.

Do they give you a gun?

No, they don't give me a gun because they don't trust me. They say: '*The Karen people are people we can't trust.*'

Do they give you food to eat when you follow them?

They give me food because I follow them closely, but it's very difficult for the villagers who are portering to get food because they don't give food to them.

Do they pay you?

They don't pay us and we also have to bring food for ourselves. We have to bring two milk tins of rice (0.5 kg / 1.1 lbs) for each villager.

When you follow the SPDC Army soldiers, do the SPDC Army soldiers enter any other villages?

No, they don't enter the villages. They [the soldiers] just go on paths in the jungle and we have to clear a trail for them until we get to O---.

Do they enter any villages when you follow them?

When I went with them, the commanding officer ordered me to guide them to the E--- area in Th--- village.

What did they do when they entered the village?

When they entered the village they went to the store and demanded that the village head buy food for them.

When you've gone [to accompany Tatmadaw troops], have there been any battles?

The soldiers' from [Tatmadaw Infantry Battalion] #203 fought once and also one time in Gk--- village.

Do the SPDC Army soldiers abuse you in any other ways?

They harass the villagers by forcing them to cut grass and to clear and build a vehicle road for them. We also have to cut grass in rubber plantations. They abuse us in so many different ways, I can't mention everything.

Do you want to share your opinion with us about the enemy's [Tatmadaw soldiers'] abuse?

The enemy plans to develop their communication [scanning and receiving] systems. The local SPDC Army soldiers said they will set up communication [scanning and receiving] systems in every part of Burma, so the KNLA soldiers can't escape from them anymore because they'll be able to track their activities and communications inside the country and foreign countries. We heard they said that, but we don't know for sure if it's true or not. We know our KNU [Karen

National Union] leaders have more knowledge than us, so we hope the KNU will protect the villagers from the SPDC Army soldiers by having the best strategy to protect the villagers.

Do you have a school in your village?

We have a school, but it only has four grades and the grades never go up [there are never classes for students above the fourth grade].

When was the school set up?

The school was set up during the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League [AFPFL] era.⁵

How many teachers do they have in the school?

There are four teachers in the school.

Where are the teachers from?

These teachers were sent by the SPDC government and they're government workers.

Do you know how much the teachers earn?

The school principal earns 35,000 kyat (US \$43) a month. Ordinary teachers, they earn 30,000 kyat (US \$37) a month.

How many students do they have in the school?

I don't know for sure, because the teachers haven't made the student name list yet.

How many students do they have if you had to guess?

I guess about between [*numbers censored for security*] students.

How much do the school students have to pay for school fees?

The students have to pay 1,500 kyat (US \$1.84) each per year.

Whom do they have to pay?

They have to pay the school principal.

Do the students have a chance to study without disruption?

The teachers are absent all the time. Sometimes they say their parents called them and they have to go home or they have to do their own personal errands, so the teachers don't come to school regularly. The students don't have the chance to study without disruption.

Do the students have the chance to study the Karen language?

⁵ Originally called the Anti-Fascist Organisation (AFO), which was formed in August 1944 as a coalition of Communist Party of Burma (CPB), People's Revolutionary Party (PRP) and Burma National Army (BNA) members, the AFPFL was not officially outlawed until 1962, despite being effectively destroyed by a factional split in April 1958 and by the subsequent inception, in October 1958, of the military 'caretaker' administration under the leadership of Ne Win. See Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnic insurgency*, pp. 60 – 87; 175 – 80; 195 - 206.

No, they don't. We don't dare to talk about it.

Do the SPDC or KNLA soldiers come and disturb the school?

No, they don't come and disturb the school, but when additional SPDC Army units come to our village with so many soldiers the students can't go to school because the soldiers use the school as their barracks. Sometimes they stay at the school for one or two weeks and without leaving, so the school principal has to ask them to move to other places, but when they have to move they complain that they don't want to [move].⁶

Do the students have to pay for anything at school?

The students' parents have to pay for everything. Nothing's free for the students.

Do you have a clinic in your village?

No, we don't have a clinic in my village. The female village elders provide traditional treatments, but they don't have any formal education. So we don't have a clinic.

Where do the villagers go when they get sick?

My villagers go to the P--- town clinic.

What common illnesses do the villagers face?

The common illnesses the villagers face are: fever, coughing, knee and elbow pain, eye infection, diarrhoea and stomach pain. They're prevalent at the end of the rainy season.

Do the villagers have the chance to work without disruption?

They villager don't have the chance to work without disruption. The villagers aren't allowed to go outside the village when USDP politicians plan to visit the village. Sometimes, [additional] SPDC Army soldiers come and stay in our village for two or three weeks. They don't allow the villagers to go outside the village to tend to their farms. So as I mentioned truthfully above, when they [Tatmadaw soldiers] go to fight [the KNLA], they don't allow the villagers to work their hill farms for about one month. The villagers don't have enough food to eat and some villagers have to borrow rice from other villagers. We have to follow the soldiers' orders because we don't dare to question them.

Do the villagers have enough food?

Don't even ask if they have enough food. As you know, at least some have many children and they don't have enough food and money, so they have to take odd jobs. If they really don't have any food, they have to borrow a basket of rice (32 kg. / 70.4 lb.) or a bowl of rice (2 kg. / 4.4 lb.) from their friends.

Do the villagers have to buy things to eat?

They have to buy everything to eat, like salt, sweet powder [MSG] and so on.

⁶ Notably, the United Nations Security Council, as part of its agenda to improve protection for children affected by armed conflict, has explicitly urged parties to armed conflict to '*to refrain from actions that impede children's access to education*'; see: Resolution 1998, S/RES/1998, July 12th 2011, paragraph 4.

How much does one big tin of rice (16 kg. / 35.2 lb.) cost?

We [normally] buy a sack of rice (48 kg. / 105.6 lb.).

How much does one bag of rice cost?

One sack of rice costs 25,000 kyat (US \$31), and one sack of rice contains three big tins.

How much is one viss of meat?

If the meat is from a large pig, one viss (1.6 kg. / 3.52 lb.) costs 3,000 kyat (US \$3.68). One viss of pork is normally 3,500 kyat (US \$4.29). Beef is cheaper than pork. One viss of pork costs 2,000 kyat (US \$2.45) and one viss of buffalo meat also costs 2,000 kyat. Karen people don't eat beef or buffalo much. Only Muslims will come and buy a cow. We don't buy visses of beef.

Do the SPDC Army soldiers develop anything in your village?

They said they'd give us zinc to build new roofs for our houses, but in the end they demanded 4,000 kyat (US \$4.91) from each villager and the villagers didn't get the zinc. For the school, they said they'd provide bricks to repair the school, but they demanded money from the villagers, three or five baht (US \$0.10 or \$0.17) per brick.

Do they repair the vehicle road for the village?

They have the *wan hsaung* [public service personnel]⁷ to repair the road, but we don't know if they repair it or not. We only see them travelling back and forth.

What do you think about the KNU?

I don't think the KNU is bad, I only think the KNU is struggling for freedom for our Karen people. I also worry for them because the enemy [Tatmadaw] has plans to destroy them, and we hope they'll struggle to get freedom soon.

Have you ever attended KNU [military] training?

No, I heard about it from my aunts and uncles⁸ and when Captain S--- was alive.

Do you have any last things to mention?

I don't have much else to mention, but I have one thing to say for my villagers and that is to get freedom, to have the chance to work without outside interference and to develop our Karen people's livelihoods, we hope the KNU political leaders will reach a peaceful resolution to stop persecution and abuse [by Tatmadaw forces]. We also need suggestions from our KNU political leaders to encourage us to face the problems [we encounter].

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

⁷ The term *wan hsaung* or 'public service personnel' has been used euphemistically by military and civilian officials in the Burma government to refer to convict porters, that is convicts pulled from civilian prisons and forced to porter military supplies and equipment in frontline conflict areas. See *From Prison to Front Line: Analysis of convict porter testimony 2009 – 2011*, KHRG, July 2011. It could not be inferred from the context of this interview whether Saw P--- was referring to convict porters or to some other form of labour.

⁸ 'Aunt' and 'uncle' are familiar terms of respect attributed to older women and men; they do not necessarily signify here any actual familiar ties between the 'aunts and uncles' and the interviewee.

- “Tenasserim Situation Update: Te Naw Th’Ri Township, April 2011,” (September 2011)
- “Tenasserim Interview: Saw K---, August 2011,” (September 2011)
- “Tenasserim Interview: Saw C---, Received in May 2011,” (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)

