



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

October 5, 2011 / KHRG #2011-B34

Tenasserim Interview: Saw T---, December 2010

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted in December 2010 in Te Naw Th’Ri Township, Tenasserim Division by a villager trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The villager interviewed Saw T---, a 59-year-old village head who, at the time of interview, was in hiding from Tatmadaw troops in an area of Tenasserim Division beyond government control. Excerpts from Saw T---’s interview with KHRG have been published in the previous KHRG field report “Militarization, Development and Displacement: Conditions for villagers in southern Tenasserim Division” however, the full transcript of his testimony is now available below. Saw T--- described witnessing attacks on villagers by Tatmadaw soldiers and cited regular demands for villagers to serve as forced porters for the Tatmadaw and other forms of forced labour as one of the main factors which originally motivated him to go into hiding. Saw T--- explained that villagers in hiding employ a range of strategies to avoid Tatmadaw forces, including coordinating security strategies and sharing information with villagers at other hiding sites, maintaining contact with and seeking protection from non-state armed groups, cultivating crops that are easy to harvest quickly, travelling covertly to villages in mixed-administration areas in order to engage in trade and other livelihoods activities, and crossing vehicle roads during the night.

Interview | Saw T--- (male, 59), Ma--- village, Te Naw Th’Ri Township, Tenasserim Division (December 2010)

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 twenty-one other interviews.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Logging

Position: 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 seven children.

How old is your oldest child?

My oldest child is 35 years old.

How old is your youngest child?

My youngest child is ten years old.

Have you ever lived in a relocation site?

No, I haven't lived in one before.

Why have you become an internally displaced person (IDP)?

Because the SPDC Army [Tatmadaw]³ soldiers forced the villagers to do forced labour and threatened villagers, we had move. The SPDC Army soldiers said we worked with the KNU [Karen National Union] and KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army], so we had to move.

What are the hiding places have you lived in?

The hiding places we've lived in are K--- village, Ht--- village, S--- village, G--- village and N--- village.

How long did it take you along the way when you fled to the first hiding place?

For some, it took a month or more than a month.

When did you have to flee into hiding?

It was about ten or twenty years ago. I don't remember anymore.

How did you feel when you had to flee into hiding?

The SPDC Army soldiers forced us to porter and forced us to do many things. That's why we decided to flee into hiding. That's all that I felt.

How has living in hiding changed the women's lives? How do the women live?

The children and women stayed in protected places when we flee, and the men, we have to carry the food and supplies.

What did the pregnant women face when they fled into hiding?

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 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.

They faced problems because it was the rainy season and we had no huts or places to live.

What did the women have to do when they had to flee into hiding?

They didn't have to do anything. They just sat down beside their things.

Who prepared the things for the families to leave?

The men had to prepare all these things and the women had to prepare the food and take care of the children.

Did the children have the chance to study [when you fled]?

No, all the children lost the chance to study and there was no education for them because they had to flee into hiding.

What do the children have to do [now]?

The children have nothing to do, they only play and shoo away birds and chickens and sweep [leaves].

Do the children go to school?

In the past, the children couldn't attend [school]. Now parents have found teachers so they can go to school, and they can study very well [without disruptions]. But we don't know what will happen in the future.

How do the children feel about having to live in hiding?

The children feel they don't have freedom to work or play, and they have to live quietly all the time.

How has living in hiding changed the elderly people's lives?

The elderly face only old age diseases. I know this because I'm very, very old myself. Nothing else has changed for them.

Do the elderly have to work?

No, they don't have to work; they only look after their grandchildren.

Do the elderly give you any opinions [advice] as you are the head of the hiding site?

They can't give any opinions [advice] because the eldest villagers suffer from dementia.

Do you plant vegetables in the hiding places?

We have to plant the vegetables which are easy to grow, harvest and eat quickly.

Do you face any problems, such as any food problems, in the hiding places?

Yes, we faced food problems in 2004 because rats destroyed our paddy fields. The villagers were starving and all we had to eat was boiled rice [porridge].⁴

When you knew you'd have to flee into hiding, did you prepare food [to take with you]?

We didn't know we'd have to move, so we hadn't prepared anything, but when we fled to the first hiding place, we hid and then went back to my old village to secretly look for food.

What are the villagers' occupations in the hiding places?

The people in the hiding sites work as loggers and collect flowers [to sell], but we have to be careful and watch out for SPDC Army forces. We don't want to meet them. If we meet them on the way, we'll get trouble. We have to work hard for food and we face many difficult problems.

What kind of livelihoods activities do the displaced people do?

We collect flowers and log wood. We don't have any other things to do. As the [Karen] elders' proverb says: "*Klee thaw taw gk'ba gk'na, kler tha mi gk'ba aw kwa,*" [roughly translates as "we have to listen for the sound of the bow, we have to look while we eat the fruit of the banyan" or "in everything we do, we must stay alert"].

What kind of trade do the displaced people do?

The way they do their business is that they go to villages secretly to buy things like buffalo and cows [to resell]. They have to work hard for their livelihoods.

Did you prepare any food when you first fled to a hiding place?

We didn't even know that we'd have to flee to a hiding place so we didn't prepare any food. When we didn't have any food, we had to go back to our old village secretly to collect food. So we had some rice to eat.

How do you protect yourselves and store food for the future when you have move from place to place all the time?

To protect ourselves, we contact the KNDO [Karen National Defence Organisation]⁵ whenever we need to move to a new hiding place.

How about [organising] food?

We have to organise ourselves to plant paddy and vegetables to eat. We don't have to buy and spend our money on [food].

⁴ When outside assistance is unavailable, and other community strategies for attempting to survive periods of acute food insecurity are insufficient, households, or entire communities, in hiding sometimes attempt to extend remaining rice supplies by eating a watered down rice porridge mixed with foraged vegetables (*dtah gka bpor*) or a more basic thin rice gruel mixed with salt (*may klaw*) in order to survive until the next harvest or until more food can be procured. Note that *dtah gka bpor* is also a commonly-eaten traditional Karen dish, in addition to being an effective means of stretching declining food stores. For more on strategies villagers in hiding use to address food insecurity, see: *Self-protection under strain: Targeting of civilians and local responses in northern Karen State*, KHRG, August 2010, pp.52-64.

⁵ The KNDO is a militia force of local volunteers trained and equipped by the KNLA and incorporated into its battalion and command structure; its members wear uniforms and typically commit to two-year terms of service.

Do the displaced people have any plan to keep themselves safe from the SPDC Army forces?

The SPDC Army knew about our plans [to flee], but as long as there are forests and secrets in the world, there's no problem [for us]. The SPDC Army knows everything about us, but there's a world and we can flee. We know this.

How do you feel about having to flee to hiding places and how this affects your livelihoods?

We think and decide about how we have to best support the children, to provide an education for them. If we can do this or not, we will see later, but we all decided to do this for the children.

How does the situation before compare with the present?

The situation was so bad before because we had to flee and sleep in the jungle with no huts or shelter for us to sleep in. Now, we have built up a small village, so it's better for us now a bit.

How do you understand the meaning of the word 'displace'?

I understand it as we have to run and we have to help each other in many different ways when we flee to a new hiding place.

How do you understand the meaning of 'displaced people'?

I don't know because it's too much [for me to explain].

How do you feel about being displaced people?

We feel bad because we have to live in fear and without hope. SPDC Army soldiers abused us, so we had to flee into hiding.

What did you have to face when you lived in your old village?

We had to face forced labour and had to porter for the SPDC Army forces.

How do you feel about being a displaced person?

One thing I feel is happiness and another thing I feel is hardship. I can feel a little freedom here, but we have problems with food, and more fear.

What opportunities did you lose when you fled into hiding?

We've lost many opportunities because we have to live in hiding. We lost all our land, farms, houses and our cows and buffaloes. The SPDC Army soldiers took them and some villagers also sold them secretly when we went into hiding. So we didn't know what to do and had to give them up.

What's different from when you lived in your old village? How about now that you have to move from place to place?

When we lived in my old village, our opportunities were very few, but now that we live in hiding we can breathe easier, like the elders' proverb says: "*Only those who are free to roam are able to clear their own path.*"

What do you want to change to make the situation better?

To make the situation better, we have to protect ourselves and keep in contact with our KNDO, and we have to stand together to protect ourselves.

Do you want to keep fleeing forever?

If possible, we don't want to move. We're further and further away from our birthplace. We can't do it anymore.

Do you want to go back and live in your old village?

We want to go back to our village but we don't dare to go back, because the SPDC Army can enter the village easily.

What do you think you'd need if you were to go back and live in your [old] village?

We have the things that we need. We have our land and plantations, but we don't dare to go back and stay. Our aunts, uncles and siblings look after the things we've left behind.

Do you think of your [current] hiding place as a temporary place [to live]?

This hiding place, we just built it like a small place to live, but I'm not sure yet.

How long do the displaced people live in each hiding place?

We can live a long time [in each hiding place] if the SPDC Army soldiers don't come. We don't want to move now because we've been living here a long time.

How is the situation currently?

The situation is sometimes good and sometimes bad because our movement is restricted by SPDC Army unit activities in the area.

Could you tell me why you started to flee?

We had to flee because the SPDC Army soldiers harassed us in many different ways. We ran to the river's headwaters to hide. People [other villagers] told the SPDC Army that we had contact with the KNU [KNLA]. Then SPDC Army soldiers came and surrounded our village and attacked KNLA troops there. At that time, one of the SPDC Army soldiers died in my hut. We had to flee again in between April and May 2000. My son went to buy some cows and buffaloes. Someone in the village said my son was a spy, so my son ran away, but the SPDC Army soldiers shot and killed him. His wife died first and my son died after. When I went to see my son's corpse, SPDC Army soldiers also shot at me. When the SPDC Army soldiers shot at me, we also shot back and we were injured. We were four people, but none of us died. The SPDC Army soldiers suffered injuries and we also got injured. We ran back and we didn't dare to stay there anymore. We fled to W--- village. A group who lived in Wa--- and Dt--- area also didn't dare to stay there anymore. We all fled to W--- village.

How long did it take you when you fled to the new hiding place?

I don't remember because I've lived in the jungle for a long time and I'm getting very old.

Do you flee whenever SPDC Army soldiers come close to your hiding place?

Whenever we hear that the SPDC Army soldiers are coming close to the hiding place, we have to go and hide at the headwaters of the river. Sometimes we have to stay there for four or five days while the SPDC Army and KNLA soldiers are fighting and the villagers have to stay in a safe place in the jungle.

How many times have you had to flee to that hiding place?

Since I fled into hiding, if I had to count, almost a hundred times.

Why don't you want to live in relocation site?

We have to avoid relocation sites. After people relocate you, you are not so different from when people breed chickens. They can take you out, and kill you and eat you when they want. They can oppress you. You have to give them when they demand things that they need.

Do you think it'd be good for you to live in a relocation site under the SPDC Army's control?

I don't think it'd be good.

Do you think it'd be good for your livelihood if the KNU [KNLA] surrendered and let the SPDC government control the area?

If the KNU [KNLA] surrender, we'll have to face more problems because the SPDC control is very difficult for us. We don't want the KNU [KNLA] to surrender. We want them to protect us and to stop the abuses by the SPDC government.

How do you want to live in the future?

In the future, we want freedom and we want our Karen people to control us.

Who do you want to control the area in which you live?

I want my Karen people to control it. We need our KNU Army group [KNLA] to be with us in our area. We have suffered a lot under the SPDC Army's control.

Do you still want to be a displaced person when there is peace?

No, I don't want to be a displaced person anymore when there is peace.

What do you understand by the word 'peace'?

I'm not sure. I know only that if we get freedom, it will stop our displacement and that our [KNU] leaders have to struggle and provide for their people.

How do you avoid the SPDC Army soldiers when they come?

How do we avoid [them]? We have to hide in the jungle, in the bush, at the river's headwaters and in the valley.

How do you learn of SPDC Army movements?

I have friends and can contact them to know about SPDC Army [troop] movements. We have to avoid them when we know they're coming.

How do you cross the vehicle road?

We have to cross the vehicle road at night time.

Do you keep in touch with the other hiding places?

Yes, we always keep in contact with them. How could we leave each other when we are of the same blood?

What do you contact them about?

We contact them to tell them where SPDC Army units are and sometimes they also send us messages about SPDC Army unit movements. We mostly contact each other about this. We know the SPDC Army soldiers want to kill and destroy us, so we have to be alert for each other, and have to avoid them.

Do you trade with the villagers who live in SPDC Army controlled areas?

We trade with villagers in the SPDC Army controlled area secretly. They sometimes exchange things and we sometimes exchange things secretly with each other. There are some who love us and [some who] hate us.

What do you need to make your situation better?

It's our leaders' duty to [improve our situation]. We're glad our leaders never rest and still struggle for us.

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

- *Tenasserim Interview: Saw P---*, Received in May 2011
- *Tenasserim Situation Update: Te Naw Th'Ri Township* (April 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)

