



News Bulletin

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Thaton Interview: Naw D---, May 2011

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted in May 2011 by a villager trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The villager interviewed Naw D---, a 48-year-old community leader in a government-controlled area of Pa'an Township, Thaton District, who described regular and ongoing demands for villagers to perform forced labour as messengers for local civilian and military officials, as well as challenges faced by villagers with regard to the cost and provision of education for children and access to healthcare. Naw D--- also expressed concerns regarding the debt burden on villagers who rent agricultural land and farm using rented animals and equipment; according to Naw D---, villagers are forced to provide landowners a disproportionate share of their harvested yields, leaving insufficient paddy for themselves and their families, leading to subsequent food shortages. She explained certain strategies villagers have adopted to address concerns, including the establishment of a community healthcare committee and a community health fund which work to assist villagers with health-related issues and to cover the costs incurred by villagers seeking care outside the village.

Interview | Naw D--- (female, 48), H--- village, Pa'an Township, Thaton District (May 2011)

The following interview was conducted by a villager in Thaton District 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 Thaton District, including eight other interviews and 94 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

Position: Village head

How many children do you have?

I have four children.

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 In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in eastern Burma, 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. As companion to this, a redesigned website will be released in 2012. In the meantime, KHRG's most recently-published field information from Thaton District can be found in the Report, "Thaton Interview: Daw Ny---, April 2011," KHRG, January 2012.

How old is your oldest child?

My oldest child is 21 years old.

How old is your youngest child?

My youngest child is 13 years old.

Do the SPDC Army [Tatmadaw]³ or the DKBA [Democratic Karen Buddhist Army] come to your village?

They came to my village a long time ago. Currently they don't come.

Do they make the villagers do forced labour?

They did before, but this year they haven't.

Do the villagers have to act as *set tha* [messengers]?⁴

In my village we have to keep two *set tha* [messengers] to send letters from one village at a time to the next.

Who do you keep the messengers for?

We keep *set tha* [messengers] for the SPDC Army, but sometimes for other army troops too, to be ready to send messages.

For which troop do you have to send messages for the most?

We have to send letters about social issues, not about political issues. The order letters are from Pa'an [Township] and we have to send the letters from one village at a time to the next. The letters are about how we have to organise and develop our villagers' lives. After we get the letters, we have to send them to other villages too. The letters talk about developing our environment, not cutting down the trees and how we have to protect our environment.

Are the letters from the social development office or from an office set up by a foreign country?



This photo was taken in May 2011 and shows Naw D--- (right) and two other villagers in Pa'an Township discussing and providing information on human rights abuses and other concerns in their community. [Photo: KHRG]

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 military, 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.

⁴ *Set tha* is a Burmese term for forced labour duty as a messenger stationed at army camps or bases and serving as a go-between to deliver orders from army officers to village heads, but also involving other menial tasks when no messages are in need of delivery.

[The letters come from] the social development office, not a foreign country's office. The letters sent to my office are from the township and district [level]. They tell us how to live and how to develop our livelihood.

What is the position you're taking responsibility for?

I'm taking responsibility for the social projects for the whole village to develop the villagers' lives. Officials from the Ministry of Progress of Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs [*Na Ta La*] came to my village to show how we have to protect nature, the trees and mountains.

What international organisations come with development projects?

One is an organisation named the UNDP [United Nations Development Programme] that runs social development projects [in Thaton District].

What's the UNDP developing for the village?

The UNDP set up a development project.

Do they support the villagers?

Yes, they provide the villagers with food and help the villagers to do agriculture and animal husbandry for their livelihoods. They provide for agricultural and animal husbandry training and a paddy storage depot. So, in all they've provided the paddy storage depot, a primary school, and the agricultural and animal husbandry training.⁵

Do they have any other projects?

In my village there are two other projects. One is a cooperative social credit project. The other one they called SRG [self-reliance groups].

What do they call the project in Burmese?

In Burmese they called it *ko ah ko ko* [self-reliance].

Do the SPDC Army or the DKBA come to make disturbances in your village?

They haven't come for a long time now and we don't wish them to come. They came before and, while they didn't abuse the villagers, they politely asked for food and said: "*Mother, can you give us the food to eat.*"

Does the Border Guard ask for anything from your village?

What is the Border Guard?

The Border Guard Force.

⁵ KHRG has previously reported the implementation of UNDP-sponsored projects in the H--- area under the auspices of the Community Development in Remote Townships (CDRT) initiative; see: *Growing up under militarisation: Abuse and agency of children in Karen State*, KHRG, April 2008, pp. 16 – 17; "State agencies, armed groups and the proliferation of oppression in Thaton District," KHRG, September 2007; and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2007: Health and education*, Photos B37 – 39.

I'm not sure about that, because when they come they go to see the village head. I work with the township development projects, so I don't know about that much.

What are the villagers' occupations?

The villagers are farmers.

Do they get enough rice each year?

No, they don't have enough rice.

Why?

Because some villagers don't have their own farm, they have to rent a field, ox, and cart from the owner. If after they harvest the paddy, they get 100 baskets of paddy (2,090 kg. / 4,680 lb.),⁶ the renter will only have 40 or 50 baskets paddy (836 kg. / 1,843.2 lb. or 1045 kg. / 2,304 lb. respectively) left after paying the landowner. That's why the villagers don't have enough food each year. They have to pay people who help them on the farm 10 baskets of paddy (209 kg. / 460.8 lb.). To harrow the farm they need an ox, and they have to pay 10 baskets of paddy for the ox. This is another reason that the villagers don't have enough food. Because they have to pay for many things, they may only have 30 baskets of paddy (627 kg. / 1,382.4 lb.) left after harvesting.

What do the villagers do when they don't have enough food to eat?

The villagers have to take odd jobs [to pay] for their daily food.

How have you experienced the change in weather?

We've experienced weather problems. It's not the rainy season, but it's been raining during the harvest time, so the paddy that was still not harvested has been destroyed.

Do some villagers work on hill fields?

People here, they don't work on hill fields.

Do you have a school in your village?

Yes, there's a school in my village.

How many standards does it have?

It has seven standards.

How many teachers does it have?

They have four teachers, but these teachers don't have full time teaching responsibilities at the school. If the teachers don't come to school as they're supposed to, we have find new teachers. A few of the village elders and I met recently and we discussed hiring new teachers.

How many teachers did the village have to hire?

⁶ Unit of volume used to measure paddy, husked rice and seeds. One basket is equivalent to 20.9 kg. / 46.08 lb. of paddy or 32 kg. / 70.4 lb. of husked rice.

The village hired one teacher.

Do the teachers teach the students well?

The teachers they don't teach the students properly well. The villagers are struggling to set up the high school but some students' parents don't take an interest. Because of this, the students don't have a good chance to go to school. This year we'll set up the eighth standard.

How many households does your village have?

There are *[number censored for security]* households in my village.

How many students in the school?

There are *[number censored for security]* students in the village [school].

Does the SPDC pay for the teachers who are sent by them?

Yes, they pay the teachers sent by them, but the villagers have to help them with food. For the teachers who don't have a house in the village, we have to find a place for them and give food to them.

How much do you have to pay for the teacher hired by the village?

It depends on the number of students she's teaching. If the standard she's teaching has 20 students, she would get 20,000 kyat (US \$24.10)⁷ a month. Each student has to give the teacher hired by the village 1,000 kyat (US \$1.20) each month.

Do you have something more to mention about education?

I just want to have higher education levels in my village.

Does the SPDC [Burmese] government keep a clinic in your village?

No, the SPDC government doesn't keep a clinic, but they keep one nurse or medic in my village. The medic sent by the SPDC government helps the villagers to cure diseases, but nothing from them is free; we have to pay for everything except for the children who have to get vaccinations [paid for by the government].

Does the SPDC government pay them a salary or do they have to pay for their own medicine and make their own business?

They motivate themselves to buy medicine and look after people in my village in order to earn an income. The healthcare centre is based in Kyauk Talone, so when the villagers are sick we have to send them to the Kyauk Talone clinic. In my village, we set up a healthcare committee and we keep a funding box to collect money for the villagers who get sick. We collect 500 kyat [US \$0.60] from each household, because one injection costs 500 kyat. However, we have funding left over that the healthcare centre didn't take from villagers and was returned. If the villagers are very sick and go to the hospital, they

⁷ 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 October 6th 2011, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 830 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

have to pay by themselves. If the villagers don't have enough food, we can lend them money from the funds we collect as well.

How long ago did you start to take social duties?

I've worked as [the village's] social development chairperson for five years, and I worked with healthcare before I got married.

Did you experience any problems when you worked in healthcare?

The problem is that when a patient is very sick and I can't take care of them anymore, I have to write the letter to the Na--- hospital and send them there.

Do you know if any of the villages which are close to your village have had companies from other countries come and set up in the area?

No, I haven't seen any company come and base itself in my village.

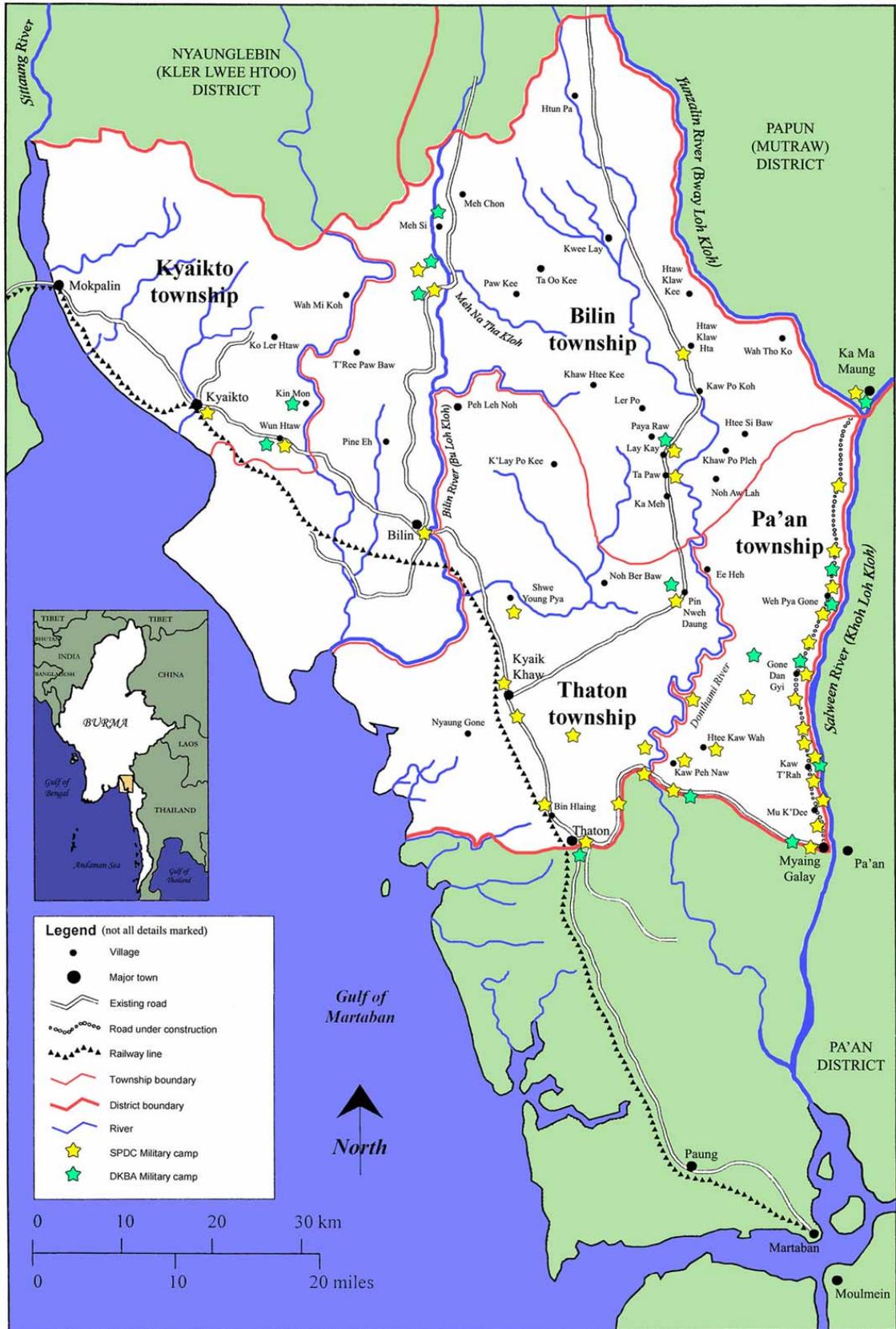
Do any companies come and take land to do agriculture?

Currently, there aren't any companies here doing agriculture. The number of companies coming to do agricultural has decreased a lot. It's not like before.

Further background on the current situation in Thaton District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- "Thaton Interview: Daw Ny---, April 2011," (January 2012)
- "Thaton Situation Update: Thaton Township, August 2011," (January 2012)
- "Incident report: Four villagers forced to guide Tatmadaw troops in Thaton District," (January 2012)
- "Thaton Interview: Naw L---, February 2011," (January 2012)
- "Thaton Situation Update: June to October 2011," (November 2011)
- "Thaton Situation Updates: May 2010 to January 2011," (May 2011)

Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo) District



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