



**Karen Human Rights Group**

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

---

**News Bulletin**

February 24, 2012 / KHRG #2012-B18

---

## **Thaton Interview Transcript: Saw T---, April 2011**

---

*This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted during April 2011 in Pa'an Township, Thaton District by a villager trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The villager interviewed Saw T---, a 60-year-old Buddhist farmer and village head, who described demands for forced labour that occurred during 2011, including for guide duty and the production of thatch shingles and bamboo poles. Saw T---noted that Karen language is not permitted to be taught in the village school, and expressed concerns over the absence of a medical clinic in the village and a lack of rain during the previous year that resulted in a marked decrease in paddy outputs. Saw T--- noted that villagers share food to deal with increasing food insecurity and described an instance in which villagers only partially complied with a forced labour demand, producing and delivering only 300 thatch shingles to Tatmadaw soldiers, instead of the 500 that had been demanded.*

---

### **Interview | Saw T---, (male, 60), A--- village, Pa'an Township, Thaton District**

---

*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.<sup>1</sup> This interview was received along with other information from Thaton District, including 12 other interviews, one situation update, and 138 photographs.<sup>2</sup>*

**Ethnicity:** Karen

**Religion:** Buddhist

**Marital Status:** Married

**Occupation:** Flatfield farmer

**Position:** Village head

#### **How many children do you have?**

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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: U Kh---, December 2011," KHRG, February 2012.

I have five children.

**How old is the eldest one?**

23 years old.

**How about the youngest one?**

14 years old.

**How many years have you been village head for?**

Already nine years.

**As you are the village head, could you tell me about your responsibilities?**

I have to meet with soldiers [from different armed groups] and friends [from neighbouring villages].

**How about any other [responsibilities]?**

No others.

**Do you have to work very far away?**

No, I only work on flat fields.

**Did you become the village head because you wanted to? Or because the villagers, the KNU [Karen National Union], or the Burmese soldiers promoted you?**

The villagers promoted me.

**Did the SPDC<sup>3</sup> want you to be the village head?**

Yes, they did.

**How about the KNU?**

They didn't say anything.

**Could you tell me about your experiences as village head?**



This photo, taken in April 2011 by the villager who conducted this interview, shows the interviewee Saw T---, a 60-year-old Buddhist farmer and A--- village head. Saw T--- described ongoing forced labour demands but noted that in one instance A--- villagers only complied partially with a demand to produce 500 thatch shingles, supplying only 300 instead, which allowed villagers to dedicate the time saved to their own livelihoods pursuits. [Photo: KHRG]

---

<sup>3</sup>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<sup>th</sup> 2011. The term *Na Ah Pa* was used by the villager who wrote this conducted this interview and interviewee and "SPDC" is therefore retained in the translation of this interview.

Before I became the village head there was a person who was higher than me. I worked with him for three years. After three years, his health was not good and he died. After that, the villagers promoted me to this position. I've worked until now and I've faced no problems.

**You have been village head for nine years. Do you ever face problems with soldiers from the SPDC, DKBA [Democratic Karen Buddhist Army], Border Guard or the KNU? If you have, please explain them to us?**

I don't have any problems with them, but if they come we have to meet with them.

**Does the SPDC [Tatmadaw] ever cause trouble for the villagers when they come?**

No, they haven't done that since I became village head. Sometimes they eat one chicken.

**How many households are in A--- village?**

There are [Censored for security] households.

**How many villagers?**

There are [Censored for security] villagers.

**What do A--- villagers mostly do?**

Some farm hill fields and some farm flat fields, but most farm hill fields. A few farm flat fields. There are [now] more problems with working. We work and we don't get food so there are food problems.

**Do your villagers get enough food from farming?**

No, not enough. There are only a few who get enough food, and there are more that don't.

**What do they do if they face food crises?**

They can't do anything. Some dig for *klee* [taro root] and they cook it with *huh nēe poe* [leftover pieces of rice]. Some borrow [food] from their friends.

**How many years ago was A--- village established?**

I don't have any records about when it was established.

**Have you heard from older people?**

I have never asked about when the village was established.

**What are the most common problems that you have to face in your village, for example, [those relating to] food or health?**

In the past, before I became a village head, there were problems like forced relocation to relocation sites. After that some villagers went and stayed in other villages, and some stayed in Th-- [village]. After a long time, they came back to the village and now [the number of] people have increased [to the original amount that lived there] before.

**What did they do when they went and stayed in other people's villages?**

They stayed in other villages so they had to work with other people.

**Has the SPDC [Tatmadaw] been to your village?**

They haven't been here for a year.

**In the past, how many times did they come in a year?**

In the past, they came three or four times a year.

**How about the Border Guard and the DKBA, have they come to your village?**

Yes, the DKBA has been here.

**Now the DKBA has changed to the Border Guard,<sup>4</sup> so how about the Border Guard?**

I have never seen the Border Guard come [to the village].

**What did they do when they came to your village before [the Border Guard transformation]?**

They came and asked about the KNU. [They asked] whether or not they stayed nearby so we told them that sometimes they came and sometimes they didn't.

**Did they arrest villagers for portering?**

No, they didn't do that, but sometimes they demanded people to be their guides.

**How about in the past two or three years?**

Since the Border Guard was founded, they have never demanded porters.

**How about in the past three or four years, before the Border Guard was founded?**

Yes, when the DKBA was around, they came, and sometimes they asked for two, three, or four people to serve as guides and porters.

**Did you see them take people's chickens when they came to your village?**

No, they haven't done that in the past one or two years, but three or four years ago they asked people to give them [chickens]. They didn't steal. They asked us for them.

**Did they pay you money or not?**

---

<sup>4</sup> While Tatmadaw and DKBA units have for years operated together, this operational hierarchy became formalised with the DKBA's transformation into a 'Border Guard Force' under control of the Tatmadaw and containing a fixed number quota of Tatmadaw officers. This transformation dates to at least May 2009, when commanding officers stated in high-level meeting of DKBA officers that the DKBA would transform itself into a 'Border Guard Force.' Leaked minutes from the May 2009 meeting are retained by KHRG on file. Ceremonies attended by Tatmadaw commanders officially announced the transformation of large portions of the DKBA into Border Guard Forces in September 2010; see, for example: "Border Guard Forces of South-East Command formed in Paingkyon of Kayin State," *New Light of Myanmar*, August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010; and "Border Guard Force formed at Atwinkwinkalay region, Myawady Township, Kayin State," *New Light of Myanmar*, August 25<sup>th</sup> 2010.

Yes, they paid money.

**Did they steal?**

No, they didn't.

**Which SPDC [Army] camp is near to your village?**

[The one] to the west of Baw Naw wə [the opposite side of the Baw Naw river], at P--- camp.

**What is the distance from your village to P---?**

You can get there in one hour.

**As it only takes one hour, do they demand thatch shingles and bamboo poles?**

Yes, they demand those.

**How about this year?**

Yes, they have.

**How many thatch shingles did they demand?**

They demanded 300 thatch shingles.

**Had you already given them [to the Tatmadaw soldiers]?**

Yes, we've already given them.

**Did you give them the complete amount?**

Yes, they demanded 500 thatch shingles but we only gave them 300.

**Did they accept that?**

Yes, they did.

**How about one or two years ago?**

They also demanded [things] one or two years ago.

**What did they demand?**

They demanded thatch shingles and sometimes they demanded bamboo poles.

**Did they demand [villagers] for portering or sentry [duties]?**

No, they didn't.

**Do you have to give them thatch shingles and bamboo poles every year?**

Yes, some years we have to give them those but some years we don't.

**Do they demand these from villages near your village?**

No, they don't.

**Do they demand these from only your village?**

No, they demand them from all the villages in the village tract.

**How many villages are there in your village tract?**

L---, N---, Th--, Ht---, and K--- village. [K---] village never has to give [thatch shingles or bamboo poles]. Our villages are near Baw Naw [river] so we have to give [the goods that they demand].

**Do you know why K--- villagers don't give [thatch shingles and bamboo poles]?**

People said that the village [of K---] is in our village tract, but it's also in another village tract. I don't know.

**Is the village far?**

They [the Tatmadaw] can see that the four villages [in our village tract] are nearby so they demanded [the goods] from the four villages. For K--- village, I don't know if they demanded [things] or not.

**Before you became the village head, had the SPDC [Army] [ever] come and killed villagers?**

Yes, they did before I became village head.

**How about after you became village head?**

Since I became village head, they have never been aggressive towards the villagers.

**In nine years [as village head], you haven't seen the SPDC [Army] kill or behave aggressively to people?**

I haven't seen the SPDC [Army] kill or be aggressive to villagers.

**How about the DKBA and Border Guard?**

Since I became village head, the DKBA [have once] met with the KNU [Army] and they fought.

**What is the situation with the SPDC [Army]? Is it better or not?**

If we compare it to the past, now it has become better. In the past, if they demanded something you had to give [them it] right away. But now, if they demand something they demand it kindly so if we don't give [them it] we also feel uncomfortable. We feel sorry for them so we give them half [of what they ask for].

**Do they accept the things that you give them?**

Yes, they do.

**Do they demand [villagers] for portering and forced labour like in the past?**

No, they don't demand [villagers] for portering and forced labour.

**How about rebuilding roads?**

No.

**Have you ever had to be a guide for the SPDC soldiers since you became village head?**

Two or three years ago, they came and they demanded [villagers] for sentries and guides and we gave them [to them]. But last year and this year, they came and called on us. They demanded that we [guide them to] Kr--- village and after [we arrived there] they demanded that the Kr--- village head [guide them].

**Do they take you with them [as their guide] for two or three days?**

No.

**How about five or six years ago?**

Yes, [in the past] they took [villagers] with them for one or two days, but they didn't take the village head. If they came to other villages, they released them.

**How many people did they demand?**

They demanded only one person to be a guide.

**Did they give the villager who guided them food?**

Yes, they did.

**Do you have a school in your village?**

Yes, we have one.

**How many grades?**

Until grade four.

**Where do you get the teachers from?**

The government gives us them.

**How many teachers do they provide?**

Three teachers.

**How many teachers is that altogether?**

Altogether there are four teachers, including one teacher from our village.

**Did you find the teacher from your village or did the government find them for you?**

The villagers found the teacher.

**Which part of the government?**

The SPDC.

**Do they pay the three teachers' salaries or do your villagers have to pay [them]?**

They [the Burmese government] pay them.

**How much do they pay them?**

Over 40,000 kyat (US \$51.95)<sup>5</sup> a month. They give the principal over 40,000 kyat per month. The teachers get over 30,000 kyat (US \$38.96) a month.

**How about the teacher from your village?**

The SPDC also pays him.

**How much do they pay them?**

He is a *kyaw lote thar* [school worker] and has already taught for 10 or 20 years, so he gets over 40,000 kyat.

**How did you build your school?**

Now we've built it with cement, but in the past we built it with wood. Later [under] a development project it was built with cement, so now the students study at that school.

**Was the development project from the KNU or the SPDC?**

The SPDC, from Pa'an.

**Did they come and build it themselves?**

No, they gave us money and asked us to hire a carpenter.

**How much did they give you for the school?**

I don't remember. It was over eight million [kyat] (US \$10,389.61).

**How much did it cost for the building [work]?**

It [the money] was all gone.

**Was it enough?**

Yes it was, but our villagers also helped [with] some of it.

**Do you know how many students are at the school?**

There are 111 students.

**If the students pass grade four, where do they continue studying?**

---

<sup>5</sup>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 February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2012, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 770 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

If they finish grade four they go to study at the school in N---. It has a *mu lo* [upper primary] school. It goes up until eighth grade.

**What is the distance between your school and N---?**

It doesn't take more than one hour by foot.

**Do the students in your village have to pay school fees?**

No.

**How about for books and materials?**

They had to pay for some books which were delivered by the SPDC. We didn't record this [the number of books delivered] every year. But this group also sent some.

**Which group?**

From the KNU.

**What do the KNU help the school with?**

They give us notebooks and textbooks for grades one, two and three.

**Do you have to pay money [for that]?**

No.

**What do the SPDC do to help the school?**

They also give books, but the students have to pay money.

**How about notebooks, do they have to pay [for those]?**

Yes, they have to pay.

**Are Karen [language] books allowed to be taught in your school?**

No.

**So, it only includes Burmese and English [education]?**

Yes.

**Why aren't Karen [language] books allowed to be taught?**

I can't tell you that. I have never asked why.

**Isn't it allowed by the SPDC? Or do the people in charge have no plan?**

I can't tell you [about that either] as I've never asked about it.

**How many years has the school been established for?**

It has already been two years since it was built by the SPDC.

**How about in the past [since the original wooden school was built]?**

It has already been eight or ten years.

**Do the students study without disruption?**

Yes, they study in peace.

**Have you ever seen them being disturbed by the SPDC or KNU?**

No, I have never seen that. If the KNU come, they don't care and they go on their way.

**Do you have a clinic in your village?**

No, but we have a healthcare worker.

**Where did they go to study?**

They went and studied at the SPDC Government training centre.

**Does the KNU have a healthcare worker?**

No.

**Has the KNU healthcare worker ever been to your village?**

I have never seen them come and inject medicine.

**If you are sick and you go the healthcare worker, do you have to pay money or not?**

Yes, we have to pay money.

**Do they ever give you [treatment for] free?**

No, they never give us free [treatment].

**Where you have to send sick people if their illness is very serious?**

We send them to Pa'an hospital.

**What is the distance between your village and Pa'an?**

It doesn't take more than one hour by car.

**How about if you go on foot?**

It doesn't take more than half a day.

**How much does it cost [to travel] from your village to Pa'an, if you go by car?**

It costs 1,500 kyat (US \$1.95).

**If you go for treatment in the town [Pa'an], how much do you have to pay per person generally?**

If you go to town, it costs a lot. It cost 6,000 kyat (US \$7.79) for [common] illnesses. Operations cost 600,000 or 700,000 kyat (US \$779.22 or \$909.09).

**What are the most common diseases that you see in your village?**

Two years ago, the most common disease was *ta k'bu ta k'beh* [general fatigue or weakness experienced before becoming sick]. Now the most common diseases are joint pains and [feelings of] heavy headedness and dizziness.

**How about malaria?**

Malaria has been reduced in the [past] one or two years.

**What do your villagers do?**

In the rainy season, they work in the flat fields and hill fields. In the dry season, they plant sesame plants and peas.

**How about doing business?**

Now, there is nothing to do business with. People only cut bamboo poles to sell, and some collect leaves to make thatch shingles, and sell them.

**What do people do to get an income?**

Some people sell [things] from their houses. They sell bread, some food and cans of fish.

**How much does it cost for one big tin (16 kg. / 35.2 lb) of rice in your village?**

It costs 6,000 kyat (US \$7.79) for one big tin of rice.

**For those people who haven't got enough food, how much they get per day if they work for other people?**

They get 2,500 kyat (US \$3.25) per day.

**Can they find rice easily?**

Yes, if they have money. People go and buy it in town and they come back and sell it.

**Do people have betelnut tree or betelvine fields?**

No, they don't have [those].

**How much does it cost for one big tin (16 kg. / 35.2 lb)<sup>6</sup> of sesame seeds?**

Last year, we sold it by the basket. It doesn't cost much this year.

**How much does it cost for one basket (32 kg. / 70.4 lb) of peas?**

It costs 20,000 kyat (US \$25.97) for one basket of peas.

---

<sup>6</sup>Note that conversions for the common measurement of basket here are based on the weight of milled rice; conversions are included here to provide an approximate figure for reference purposes only.

**How much sesame seeds and peas will [the village] produce [this year]?**

There are only few people who grow those so it [the village] doesn't produce a lot.

**How many people have these kinds of plantations?**

There might be about ten people. People who don't have cows can't do this. Only people who have a couple of cows can do this because they have to plough the ground to plant sesame plants and peas.

**Do people get a lot of paddy plants?**

Last year, people got 300 paddy plants, but this year they only got 100. Mostly, they got only five carts worth. It was very difficult this year.

**Why?**

It was because of the weather. It didn't rain properly. There was no water in the fields the whole year. It was very dry. Last year, it rained at the end of the year.

**How many villagers have got enough food for this year?**

It has been very difficult this year. Most people haven't got enough food. Only ten houses have got enough food. Some people cannot pay their workers so there are sometimes arguments. They haven't got enough food so they can't give their workers their pay.

**What do you plan to do this year about the food [situation]?**

We have no plan. We work like this [in order to] eat.

**Have any companies come to work in your area?**

Companies haven't come to work in our area.

**Do you know about the civilian government that has been elected?**

No, I don't know about that.

**The SPDC elected a new civilian government?**

Yes, I heard that on the radio.

**As village head, what do you think about the new prime minister? Do you think there will be changes?**

I don't know if they will be better or worse than the last one.

**The Burmese [Government] said they have made peace. Do you see peace?**

I don't see real peace. However, if we compare it to the past, things have become better.

**Do you have a different opinion about the new prime minister?**

No.

**Are your villagers happy with the new prime minister?**

I haven't heard that they are happy.

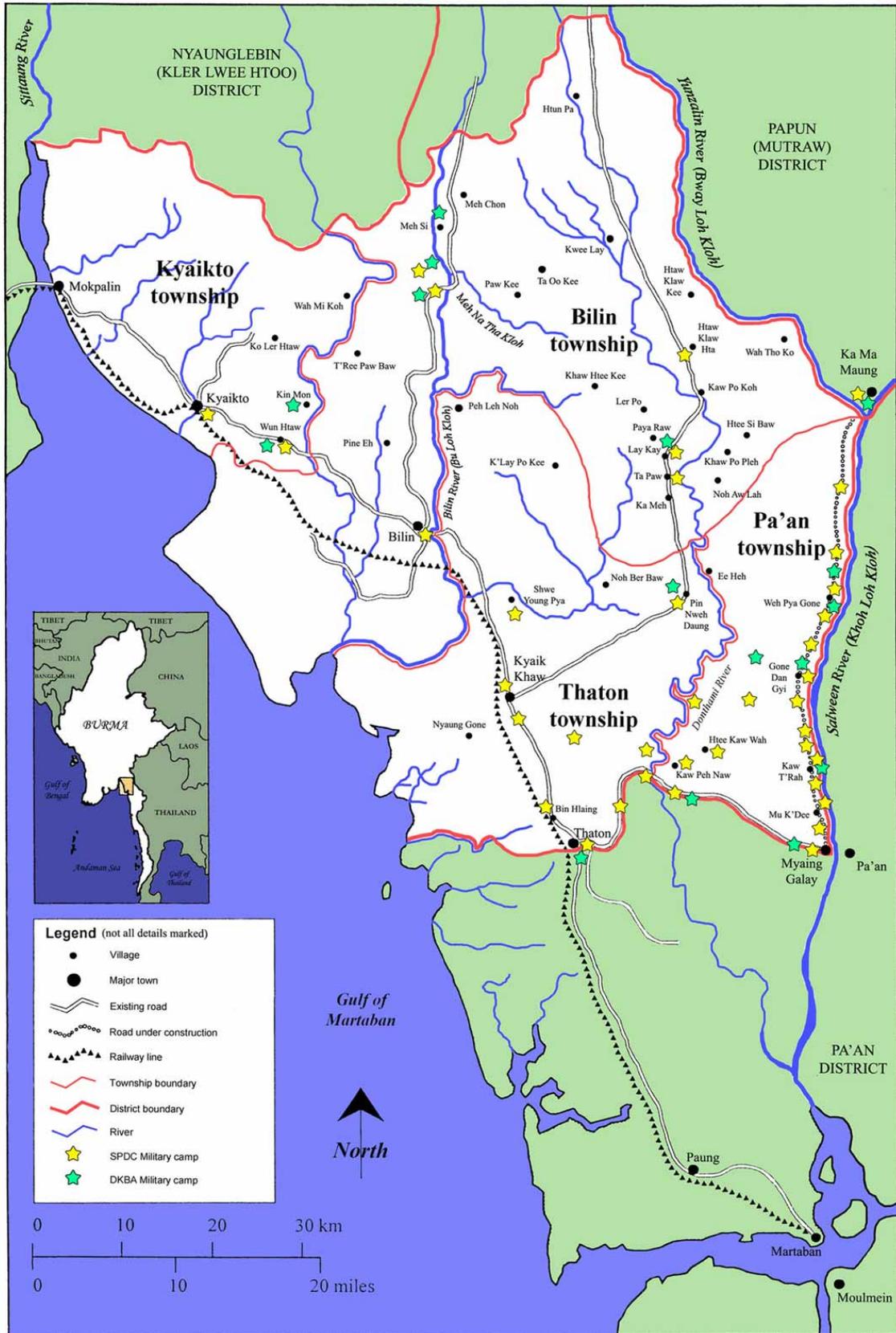
**How do they see [things]?**

They also don't know if things will better or not. They've just heard [about the new government] from other people and the radio.

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

- "Thaton Interview: U Kh---, December 2011," (February 2012)
- "Thaton Interview: Naw D---, May 2011," (February 2012)
- "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 (Doo Tha Htoo) District



©Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), 2005