



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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Thaton Interview: Saw L---, October 2010

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted during October 2010 in Bilin Township, Thaton District by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The community member interviewed 24-year-old Saw L---, a motorboat driver from P--- village, who described being forced to transport rations and ammunition by boat to a Tatmadaw camp at Waw Mu village four or five times a year. He also described restrictions on the transportation of goods such as petrol and machinery, specifically along routes where gold-mining takes place, and taxes levied at checkpoints along the river by DKBA and Tatmadaw troops. The presence of seven DKBA and three Tatmadaw checkpoints on the stretch of river between Waw Mu and Bilin, mean that Saw L--- can incur costs of approximately US \$122.25 on a single return trip. Villagers from P--- are reportedly required to perform set tha, or messenger duties, at Waw Mu and Meh Pray Kee camps; villagers have responded to this by establishing a system whereby such duties are shared, with villagers paying a fee of around 30,000 kyat to the villager serving as set tha on behalf of the village for that particular month. However, the forced labour demands reduce the time that villagers have to spend on their own work. Information is also provided on the transformation of DKBA battalions into the Tatmadaw Border Guard, with DKBA soldiers in Bilin Township described as reluctant to cooperate. Saw L--- also described events leading up to the November 2010 National Election in Burma, including a meeting in which P--- village leaders were required to sign documents provided by the Tatmadaw indicating support for the Burma government at that time on behalf of all P--- villagers over 18 years of age.

Interview | Saw L---, (male, 24), P--- village, Bilin Township, Thaton District (October 2010)

The following interview was conducted by a community member 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 one other interview, one situation update and 24 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

¹KHRG trains community members 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, community members are trained to use loose question guidelines, but also to encourage interviewees to speak freely about recent events, raise issues considered to be important and share their opinions or perspectives on abuse and other local dynamics.

²In 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, "Sustained Tatmadaw resupply operations in Thaton, Nyaunglebin and Papun during ceasefire," KHRG, May 2012.

Religion: Christian
Marital Status: Single
Occupation: Motorboat driver

How many siblings do you have?

I have seven siblings.

Are you the youngest, middle, or eldest sibling?

I am the eldest one.

What are your responsibilities in P--- [village]?

When the Burmese Army [Tatmadaw] from Waw Mu needs *loh ah pay*³, like transporting rations, I have to send [what they demand] to them.

Is there an SPDC Army [Tatmadaw]⁴ camp in Waw Mu?

Yes, there is both an SPDC and a DKBA [Democratic Karen Buddhist Army] camp.

How many times each month or year do you have to transport rations for the SPDC and DKBA?

I have to transport rations four or five times a year.

What things do you have to send?

Rice and other foods.

Do you also have to transport other things like bullets, or other military equipment?

Yes.

Do you have to transport things alone for the whole village?

I have a boat, so I have to transport things for the whole village.

Do they pay you when you send the things to them?

No, they don't give any payment.

Can you tell us about your experiences as a motorboat driver; for example, do you have to pay to pass checkpoints?

³*Loh ah pay* is a Burmese term now commonly used in reference to forced labour, although traditionally referring to voluntary service for temples or the local community, not military or state projects.

⁴In 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 4-10th 2011. The term *Na Ah Pa* was used by the villager who wrote this report and "SPDC" is therefore retained in the translation of this report.

They ask for less when we go to Bilin. I have to pay 2,000 or 3,000 kyat (US \$2.44 or 3.67)⁵ [at each checkpoint controlled by the DKBA and Tatmadaw]. But if when you come back you are carrying goods, petrol or machinery, they demand more, at least 4,000 to 5,000 kyat (US \$4.89 or \$6.11). Sometimes, they yag [ask many questions or cause trouble] when they are drunk. They demand more if you are carrying more goods, but the main things that they focus on are petrol and machinery. They check for these. If these things are included [in the boat], they take them away.

Why do they take those things away if you are carrying them?

They don't allow those things to be brought to Htoo Bpu [literally 'gold hole', a place where a company is mining for gold]. They check every boat.

Who doesn't allow boats to transport those things?

The DKBA.

What about the SPDC Army?

The same. They also don't allow it.

Do you know why they don't allow machinery and petrol to be transported to Htoo Bpu?

I know a little. The people who work in Htoo Bpu have to pay tax every month, and if they pay it they are allowed to bring machinery and petrol with them. The SPDC and DKBA ban the transportation [of machinery and petrol]. People have to come and pay it on their own [in order to transport those things]. They let them transport those when people give them the tax.

Does it mean that they allow people to transport those things if they pay a tax every month?

Yes. The Burmese [Tatmadaw] officer told me that when I came back to the Waw Mu checkpoint. You can transport it when there is time. [He said] "*We will ban the transport of those things because people don't come and pay tax.*"

Have you ever carried petrol and machinery?

I never carry those. Some people carry them secretly. I never do. I tell them [the soldiers at the checkpoint] honestly when I am carrying it [petrol and machinery]. I don't want to argue with them when they check my boat. I just carry my goods. Everyone who sells goods in Waw Mu comes and gives their goods to me. They [the soldiers] have a duty to check boats so they check them. They check them even if you tell them that there are no goods that they have banned.

Where did you drive the motorboat from and to?

Waw Mu to Bilin.

How many DKBA, KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] and SPDC Army checkpoints are there between Waw Mu and Bilin?

⁵As of June 1st 2012, all conversion estimates for the kyat in this interview are based on a rate of 818 kyat to US \$1. This reflects new measures taken by Burma's central bank on April 2nd 2012 to initiate a managed float of the kyat, thus replacing the previous fixed rate of 6.5 kyat to US \$1.

The KNLA has no checkpoints. There are seven DKBA checkpoints and three big SPDC Army checkpoints.

Do you know the places where they have checkpoints?

There are two checkpoints between Waw Mu and P'Na, one is a DKBA checkpoint and the other is the SPDC Army's. There is one checkpoint on the way down to Bp'Da Daung, one checkpoint at Oh Baw Hta, Burmese [Tatmadaw] checkpoints at Nah Gyi and Bpra Tha, and DKBA checkpoints at Yin Ka Ta and Yin Oh. I don't know the name of the checkpoint down to Yin Oh. There is one DKBA checkpoint between Yin Oh and Payasin, and one Burmese Army checkpoint at Payasin.

There are many checkpoints on the way. What is the balance between your income and outgoings? Do you get a profit?

Sometimes I have to argue with them depending on how much money they demand. They demand too much sometimes. I get a little profit for myself.

You said that you have to pay at least 3,000 kyat (US \$3.67) at each checkpoint.

You don't need to argue with them. You have to pay at least 1,000 kyat (US \$1.22). They demand 1,000 or 2,000 kyat (US \$1.22 or \$2.44).

Do you have to pay at every checkpoint, whether you are carrying goods or not?

There are some big checkpoints, like at Yin Oh. They demand 5,000 kyat (US \$6.11) when you go past on the outward journey and 10,000 kyat (US \$12.22) when you are coming back. At other checkpoints, you can give them 2,000 or 3,000 kyat (US \$2.44 or \$3.67) when you are on your way there and 4,000 to 5,000 kyat (US \$4.89 or \$6.11) when you come back.

How much do you have to pay at all the checkpoints?

The total is over 100,000 kyat (US \$122.25) for a round trip.

How much do you still have left [after paying all the taxes], over 100,000 kyat?

No.

Do you think you get a profit when you calculate your costs?

I don't lose out. I can rely on this job. I don't farm. Now I work on plantations. I don't drive a motorboat [full-time]; I do it when I am free. I went to drive the motorboat the day before yesterday. I also work on plantations.

Do the SPDC and the DKBA come to your village?

They came in the summer, but they didn't come in the rainy season.

Do they steal the [P---] villagers' chickens when they come?

No.

Have you seen them harm villagers?

No.

Do they ask for villagers to do *loh ah pay* and *set tha*⁶ duties?

Yes, they do.

What do they ask the *loh ah pay* and *set tha* to do?

They ask them to cook rice and carry water.

Where do villagers from P--- have to go to do *set tha* duties?

They go to Waw Mu and Meh Pray Kee [camps].

The villagers have to go to two places. Can the villagers do their own work?

Sometimes. I'm not free at the moment, but I have to take the time and go [to the Tatmadaw and DKBA camps]. The rest of the people aren't free [to go to the army camps]. They do their work. Whenever they order, we have to go.

We heard that other villages have to pay a *set tha* fee. Does your village have to pay this also?

Yes.

How much does your village have to pay per month?

They [the person serving as a *set tha*] demand a fee for each day. They demand 3,000 kyat (US \$3.67) per day. It will be several times 10,000 kyat (US \$12.22) if you pay per month. One month costs 30,000 kyat (US \$36.67).

Do they have to hire people every day?

Only people who don't go [to do *set tha* duties] have to hire people.

How many houses are there in your village?

There are [censored for security] houses in P--- village.

[Censored for security] houses, and they have to go to do *set tha* duties and *loh ah pay* for two [army] camps?

Yes. They have to go when they are asked to by the SPDC and the DKBA.

Do you have time to do your own work?

Even when they aren't free, they have to leave their work behind.

Will you have enough food for next year when you have had to leave your work [to do *loh ah pay*]?

⁶*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.

Yes, it is enough as we have jobs. We buy food with money. Everyone who lives there [in P--- village] farms hill fields and plantations. When the time is up, we sell some food, and keep some to eat.

Is it easy to find money there [in P--- village]?

They [some villagers] carry things [for other people] to earn money. But people said that they have stopped carrying things.

Is there a school in your village?

No, children go and study at Waw Mu. It is close, just on the other side of the water [river]. The villagers live in the plantations. They lived there in the past and they still live there now.

Do you know the camp commanders who occupy Waw Mu [village]?

I know one. His name is Pu Kheh. I mean, he is in the DKBA.

What is his position?

His rank is two chevrons [corporal].

Do you know any of the others?

I know one of my friends. His father is the biggest [highest ranking] person in the DKBA in Waw Mu. I don't know his father, I just know him. We are friends. He drives a car. His father is the biggest one. He drives for his father. He told me, "*in the future the DKBA will*" [inaudible]. I asked him whether the DKBA will have to go back [to their headquarters] or not. It looks like they will do what they want, according to what he said. They will fight against the Burmese Army if they come and give them orders to do something.

Do you know your friend's name?

His name is Saw D---.

Does he live in Waw Mu?

He comes and visits Waw Mu. His parents work in Htoo Bpu [gold mining site].

Does he have any position?

No, he just drives a car. His father and brother have positions [in the DKBA].

Is he in the DKBA?

Kind of, but he works with the DKBA so we can say that he is in the DKBA.

Now, we heard that the DKBA has to transform into the Tatmadaw Border Guard. Have they already transformed or do they remain as the DKBA in your area?⁷

⁷While 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

Most have transformed [into the Border Guard], but many are still left. They heard that they would have to go back [to their headquarters] and they were sent to the [Thai-Burma] border. They [the Burma government] will hold an election and everyone [all of the DKBA] has to go back. They have to go back and attend the [Border Guard] training. The Burmese Army will replace them.

Haven't they gone back?

No, they haven't gone back.

Have they changed their badges?

No, they haven't changed them; they still use them [their DKBA badges]. Some people wear Burmese [Border Guard] badges. Most of them don't wear them.

What are the opinions of the DKBA soldiers who don't want to wear the Border Guard badge?

They don't have any desire to cooperate [with the Tatmadaw]. They just want to remain as they are.

What is the conflict between the DKBA and the SPDC [Tatmadaw]?

They don't see each other. They stay in different places. They don't have a connection with one another. When I was with them, they would shoot at the Burmese [Tatmadaw] soldiers. They argue with each other. They don't have a connection with one another. They stay separate.

Do you know about any other things between the DKBA and the SPDC that I haven't asked you about?

No.

Now, we hear that the SPDC [Burma government] will hold an election [in November 2010]. What are the villagers' in your village and neighbouring villages' opinions about this election?

My father and the village chairperson went to meet with the SPDC Army once. The SPDC called them to come and meet them. They went and they had to sign [on behalf of the P--- villagers in support of the Burma government] for the election. People who were over 18-years-old had to sign, but they didn't know what they were signing for. They signed without desiring to.

Did they have to bring along a village name list when they went to sign?

They asked for everything.

What is your personal opinion on the election?

I don't stay in the village [Waw Mu] a lot. I come here [P--- village] when I am free. I don't like to stay in Waw Muh village. I never joined the army [Tatmadaw or DKBA] but my blood is real. I

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 22nd 2010; and "Border Guard Force formed at Atwinkwinkalay region, Myawady Township, Kayin State," *New Light of Myanmar*, August 25th 2010.

never mix with other blood. I love my people. I love my people so I left the place [Waw Mu village]. They [the DKBA] came to Waw Muh village; I was with them and I drank beer with them. For the Burmese [Tatmadaw], I don't want to be with them. I am just with them when I work with them. I don't spend time with them. I come back on my own. I am not interested in them. I am free anytime to help my people. Like the women who sell lottery tickets. They [the soldiers] are over 30-years-old, and they said that they were single. They came to visit. They lied to the women and they took them when they went. Later they didn't take the women with them. They didn't stay with the women in the end.

When did this happen?

Not too long ago, it was in April or May. He [a soldier] took several women, and he didn't take any of the women with him permanently.

Do you know the DKBA [soldiers] who took the women?

I don't know, but I know one of the women.

Do you know her name?

Her name is Naw M---. She went with two DKBA soldiers. As this woman is my friend and I treat her as my sister, I spoke to her and she cried. I told her that if she acted in this way I would treat her as a woman who is *ter gher ter kler* [literally, 'unstable' who has many boyfriends or sleeps with many men]. I told her this and she cried.

How many women did the DKBA treat in this way?

There were two or three women, but I don't know their names.

So you just know Naw M---. How old is Naw M---?

She is 17 or 18-years-old.

Are her parents still alive?

She lives with her mother. Her father died one month ago.

Did she get pregnant?

No.

Does she still live in the village?

I don't see her. I haven't visited her. She lives in the village. The DKBA [soldier] she went with said himself that he was single, but he has a wife and children. I don't feel good because she is my villager, but I don't know what to say.

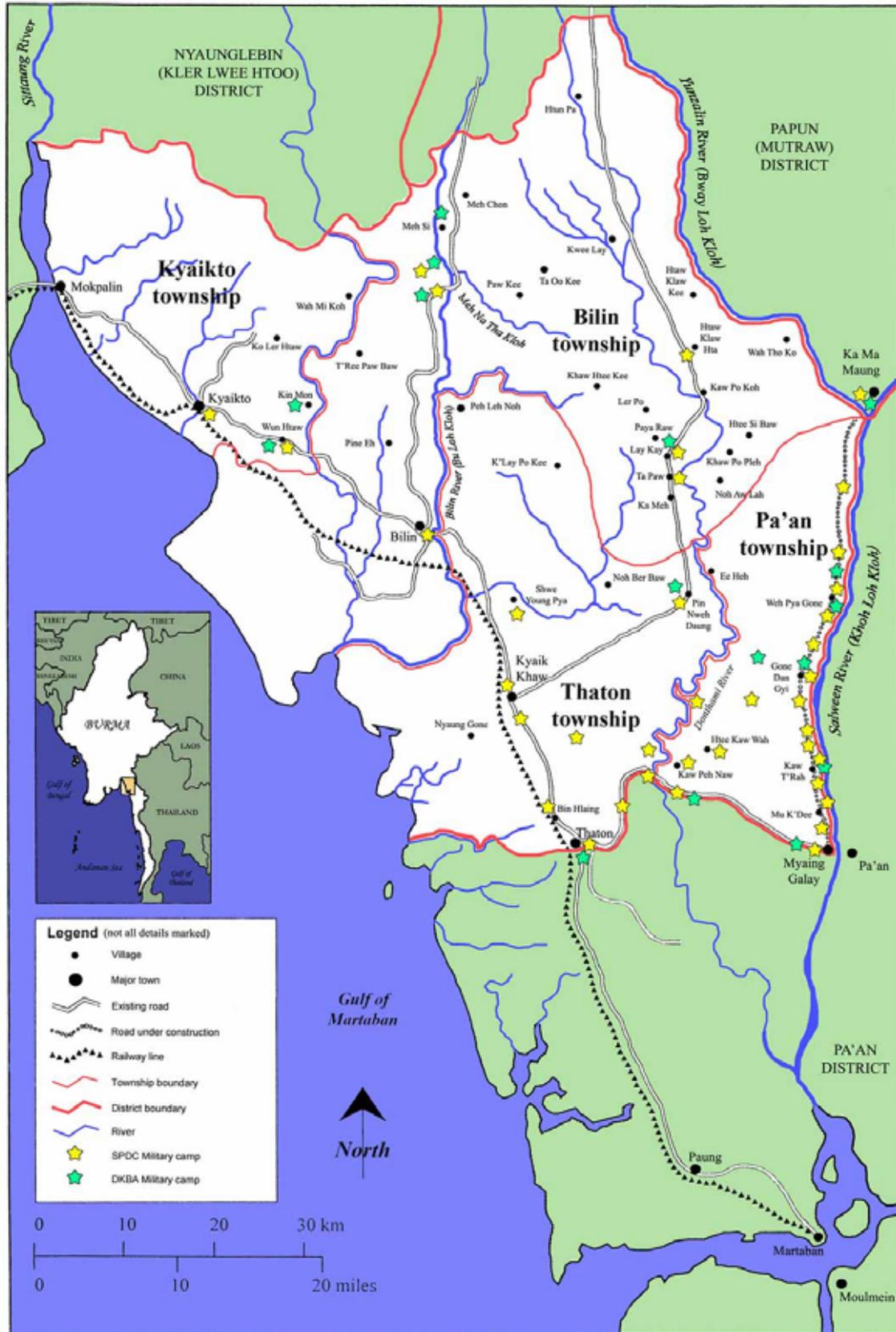
Do you have other issues that you want to mention?

If I have to say what I feel, the DKBA and the Burmese Army aren't good to my people.

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

- “Sustained Tatmadaw resupply operations in Thaton, Nyaunglebin and Papun during ceasefire,” (May 2012)
- “Forced labour in Bilin Township,” (May 2012)
- “Thaton Situation Update: Bilin and Kyaikto Townships, October 2012 to June 2011,” (March 2012)
- “Thaton Interview Transcript: Saw S---, April 2011,” (March 2012)
- “Thaton Interview Transcript: Saw T---, April 2011,” (February 2012)
- “Thaton Interview: U Kh---, December 2011,” (February 2012)
- “Thaton Interview: Naw D---, May 2011,” (February 2012)

Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo) District



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