



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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Pa'an Interview: Saw Bw---, September 2011

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted during September 2011 in Lu Pleh Township, Pa'an District by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The community member interviewed Saw Bw---, a 25-year-old logger from Eg--- village, who described events that occurred while he was carrying out logging work between the villages of A--- and S---. He provides information on military activity in the area, specifically about shifting relations between armed groups, with Border Guard and DKBA troops ceasing to cooperate, and a heightened Tatmadaw presence in the area. Saw Bw--- also explained the disruptive impact of fighting between Border Guard and armed groups in the area on A--- villagers, who are described as fleeing to avoid conflict, as well as providing information on one instance in which A--- villagers were ordered to relocate by the commander of Border Guard Battalion #1017, but instead chose strategic displacement into hiding. He mentions the difficulties that he had in logging following the Border Guard's increased presence in the area. Saw Bw--- also described the presence of landmines in the area around A--- and how his employer paid approximately US \$1222.49 to DKBA troops to have them removed. This incident concerning landmines is also described in a thematic report published by KHRG on May 21st, 2012, Uncertain Ground: Landmines in eastern Burma.

Interview | Saw Bw---, (male, 25), Eg--- village, Lu Pleh Township, Pa'an District (September 2011)

The following interview was conducted by a community member in Pa'an 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 Pa'an District, including two other interviews, one situation update, and 82 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Occupation: Logger

¹ KHRG 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 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 Pa'an District can be found in the report, "Pa'an Interview: Saw P---, September 2011," KHRG, June 2012.

How long ago did you go to live there?

Quite a long time ago.

A long time ago?

Yes.

Did you go there during the dry season?

It wasn't in the dry season. It was when some people had finished planting the paddy.³

Where did you stay when you went there?

I stayed between S--- and A--- [villages].

A--- and S---, right?

Yes.

Are there many households there?

There are a few households; they are in the bush. As you know, they are bush people.

You stated that you have worked in A---. Did you have anything to be afraid of?

We had to be afraid because people travelled back and forth.

Who travelled back and forth?

The people who travelled were Border Guard [soldiers]. We couldn't live there [in the forest between A--- and S---] any longer so we had to flee [in September 2011].

Why were villagers afraid there?

They were afraid because of the Border Guard, so they fled separately [in January 2011].

Were there any battles involving the Border Guard?

Battles happened once or twice. They fought at a place located to the west of where I lived.⁴



This photo, taken in September 2011, shows 25-year-old Saw Bw---. He explained the situation and conditions in the village, and gave information about battles that took place between the Border Guard and the DKBA near to the village of A--- around January and August 2011, and described the conditions in his village of Eg---. [Photo: KHRG]

³ The villager here mentions that he went to live between A--- and S--- villages during the period when villagers were finishing planting paddy seedlings, which is typically around June or July. However, the community member who conducted this interview explained that the villager in fact arrived in September of that year, 2010.

⁴ Additional information provided by the community member who conducted this interview specifies that the fighting referred to occurred between Border Guard and DKBA troops in January 2011. DKBA troops based in the villages of A--- and S--- were unable to maintain control over the area following the arrival of Border Guard troops in January 2011, after which the DKBA moved to Thoo Mweh Hta, and the Border Guard remained in and around A--- and S--- villages. Fighting between the two groups is reported to have occurred frequently in 2011.

What place is to the west?

The place is called Thay Weh [an area of forest]. It was to the west of Thay Weh.

Did any battles take place in A--- village?

When I returned [to Eg--- village in September 2011], there was no fighting at that time. I have no idea what happened later.

You mentioned that a battle took place. Who did the Border Guard fight with?

They fought with [villager pauses]. I can't say.

Just tell me; you don't need to worry. Did they fight with the KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army], the DKBA, or the Burmese [Tatmadaw]?

They fought with the DKBA. Maybe they fought with the KNLA, I don't know.

Did the A--- villagers stay in the village or not?

When I left to go back [to Eg---], the villagers weren't there.

They weren't there anymore?

No. Maybe they had fled to town but I didn't see them. I don't know where they fled to. We were new people there [in A--- village] because we weren't from there.

What villages are close [to the area of forest where the interviewee lived]?

A--- and T'Moo Hpoh villages are.

Did the battle take place in T'Moo Hpoh [village]?

Previously, there hadn't been any battles in T'Moo Hpoh, and the DKBA who had troops just stayed there for a few days. They [the DKBA] heard that the Border Guard had followed them and so they moved to another place.

Where did they [the DKBA] move to?

They went back to the east of A---. They gathered together and stayed in Thoo Mweh Hta [the site of an old DKBA camp].

Did you hear the sound of gunfire there [in A---] every day?

There wasn't gunfire every day but when we stayed close to there, before I went back [to Eg--- village, in September 2011] the gunfire could be heard once or twice. Maybe they [the Border Guard and DKBA] were fighting with each other.

Did it [the gunfire] happen when you first moved there [to A---]?

There wasn't any gunfire when I first moved to A---. I just heard people [other villagers] say that there would be conflict in the summer. I thought that there wouldn't be any conflict. I had to come back [to Eg--- village] when the conflict happened.

You said that the villagers who were there fled to the west, to town. Why did they have to flee?

The first time the villagers fled, they said that they were ordered [by Battalion Commander Leh Thay of Border Guard Battalion #1017 at the beginning of January 2011] to flee to Ek--- [by the end of the month]. Later, [following a period of hiding in the forest] they came back [to A---] and stayed with stable hearts because they didn't see anything that was strange to them. Eventually, the Border Guard came [at some point in January 2011] and all the people fled.

Who ordered them to flee?

I can't tell you that because I didn't ask them that.

You thought that they fled to the west because of one armed group?

They fled and didn't say anything. They fled of their own accord [before the Border Guard came]. I'm not from there, so I have no idea.

Could you do logging properly?

We could do it properly at the beginning.

Could you do it later?

Later, we heard that they [the Border Guard] had come back. We didn't dare to keep doing it so we came back [to Eg--- village].

How many of you went there [to S--- and A---]?

There were twelve people and six elephants.

Are Meh Hpre and Meh K'Naw close by?

They are quite close, but far for me to go; I have never been there. I have just heard their names.

How about those places, did you hear any explosions from Meh Hpre and Meh K'Naw?

I didn't hear anything. They [Border Guard and Tatmadaw soldiers] left for somewhere but I don't know whether they were going to Meh Hpre or Meh K'Naw.

How about Htee Kloh Thaw and Htee K'Neh?

When we came back through Htee Kloh Thaw yesterday, nothing had happened there. People were still there.

How many times did battles take place there?

In the place where we went to live? Or to the west of the place where we lived?

In Htee Kloh Thaw.

I have no idea about that.

We heard that there have been many battles in Htee K’Neh. Did you hear anything when you stayed there [between A--- and S--- villages]?

I didn’t hear anything in that area. Sometimes, we heard the sound of people firing guns but we didn’t ask anybody about it. We just heard people [villagers] say that people [soldiers] fired things in a place but we didn’t ask where.

In your opinion, when the Border Guard and Tatmadaw soldiers came [to A---], how many of them were there? Were there a lot?

A few days ago, hundreds and hundreds of them came. They were following [the DKBA].

How did they come?

They came by motorboat. First, they went on foot to Taw Hplah Day [village]. They followed them [the DKBA] by motorboat from place to place as well. They came with five or six motorboats.

In your opinion, how many people can fit in one big motorboat?

Many people can fit in them because they had generators. I didn’t see them; I just heard about it from people.

Did you stay close to the Salween River?

It was very close. We looked at the Salween River and we saw them.

Close to the Salween River?

Yes.

One month ago [August 2011], how many times did you hear the sound of guns?

Maybe, I heard it once or twice. I heard people [other villagers] say that people [the Border Guard and DKBA] were fighting each other in place after place. I didn’t ask anybody about it.

In the past, did Black Scarves⁵ come to that area [near A--- village]?

In the past, they were there. But they haven’t been there recently.

Have they come recently?

They haven’t come.

Who was there [in A---]?

They [KNLA soldiers] sometimes came there. They just came there once per year.

Currently, do they go there more and more?

I think there will be a lot of them [KNLA soldiers] if they go there [A--- village] as they did in the past.

⁵ ‘Black Scarves’ is a term commonly used by villagers to denote the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), in reference to the black scarves that form part of their uniform.

Do they [the DKBA and KNLA] now cooperate with each other?

Yes, the two armed groups cooperate.

Do a lot of Yellow Scarves⁶ cooperate with the KNLA in that area [around A---]?

I didn't ask anybody. I saw five or six [DKBA] soldiers in a motor boat [on the Salween River]. Ten [DKBA] soldiers were doing sentry duty. The DKBA soldiers placed the DKBA flag in the place where they were based.

Which place was that?

The place was Thay Weh.

Wasn't the Border Guard there?

The Border Guard wasn't there. They were staying in a different place.

Did they [the Border Guard and DKBA] stay close to each other?

Yes, they stayed close by.

What did you hear about the Border Guard and DKBA? Did they stop contacting each other? Do they still cooperate with one another?

I heard that they don't cooperate with each other. They have to stay in their own camps and if they [the Border Guard] come [to where the DKBA are based] they [the DKBA soldiers] will shoot at them.

They [the Border Guard and DKBA] aren't cooperating with each other anymore?

They aren't.

Did you hear anybody tell you who the DKBA soldiers who stayed there [in Thay Weh] were?

I don't know. I didn't ask about anything.

You just heard that they were from the DKBA?

Yes, they were DKBA.

Don't you know their military unit?

I didn't ask. I just knew that they were with the DKBA and that was enough. We were working amongst them.

Didn't you ask anyone anything about the Burmese [Tatmadaw]?

I didn't ask anyone anything about them either. As we are Karen, we didn't dare to ask anything. We had to wait and listen.

⁶ 'Yellow Scarves' is a term commonly used by villagers to denote the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), in reference to the yellow scarves that form part of their uniform.

You said that you went there [the area of forest between A--- and S--- villages]. Was it close to Yaw Poh and T'Kwee Klah?

I have been to Yaw Poh but it's not close. I have been to Htee Kloh Thaw and Htee K' Neh [villages].

When you were in Yaw Poh, did the villagers have to flee?

When we went there, nothing happened. People stayed in the village the entire time. All of the people were there when we left to come back [to Eg--- village].

Did the Border Guard previously fire heavy weapons and force villagers to flee? Are you sure?

I don't know when they fired heavy weapons. I don't know whether they had to flee or not. We weren't working close to them.

Do you think the Border Guard will go there [Yaw Poh]? Which village will the battles take place in future?

I have no idea. In the past they [the DKBA] didn't wait for them [Border Guard] and they always moved their camp.

In which direction do you think that the DKBA will move their camp?

I heard from people that they have moved to Thoo Mweh Hta. The monk built a pagoda there. If they [the Border Guard] really follow them there, they [the DKBA] will shoot them.

They might fight each other only in Thoo Mweh Hta?

If they fight, they will fight each other in Thoo Mweh Hta.

They won't fight them at the front? As you saw and heard things while living there, if you would like to tell me anything else, you can tell me.

I don't have anything else to tell you.

If we compare that place [the area of forest between A--- and S---] with the place where you live now [Eg--- village], how different is the situation?

If we compare the places, the place where I live is a bit better. In the past, one or two years ago, people said that nothing happened and that it was peaceful there [in A---]. It's only this year that people have had to flee from [A---] village.

Do you think you will go and do logging there? How do you think the situation will be?

I don't think about that at present.

Will it be easy or not?

Not easy. If the boss asks us to go, we will go. So far, it hasn't been easy.

Where does your boss come from?

He is from Ek---

Is he Burmese or Karen?

Karen.

Does he serve anywhere [as a soldier]?

He doesn't serve anywhere.

Is he a civilian?

Yes.

When you went to work there [between A--- and S--- villages], who did your boss pay tax to? Did you heard about that?

I didn't hear about it. For the east side [DKBA]⁷, he asked them to remove the landmines and paid them 1,000,000 kyat (US \$1222.49)⁸. I heard this happened only once. He told us this even though we hadn't asked him.

You didn't even know that he paid it [tax] to the west side [Tatmadaw or Border Guard]?

He didn't tell us. We didn't know.

You went there and came back [to Eg--- village]. Is this all the information that you have?

This is all that I know.

How many days ago did you arrive back here?

Four days ago.

Further background on the current situation in Pa'an District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- "Pa'an Interview: Saw P---, September 2011," (June 2012)
- "Pa'an Situation Update: Dta Greh and Lu Pleh Townships, September 2011," (June 2012)
- "Pa'an Interview: Saw Hs---, April 2012," (June 2012)
- "Pa'an Interview: Saw T---, September 2011," (June 2012)
- "Pa'an Interview: Saw Ng---, March 2012," (May 2012)
- "Pa'an Interview: Saw Ht---, March 2012," (May 2012)
- "Pa'an Interview: Saw Hn---, March 2012," (May 2012)

⁷ An excerpt of this interview, previously published by KHRG in May 2012 in the report *Uncertain Ground: Landmines in eastern Burma*, states the armed group responsible for the landmine clearance as being the KNLA, however, follow-up information received by KHRG in June 2012 from the community member who conducted this interview clarifies the armed group as in fact being the DKBA.

⁸ As of June 13th 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.

