



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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Mergui/Tavoy Interview: Saw K---, April 2012

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted during April 2012 in Ler Mu Lah Township, Mergui/Tavoy District by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The community member interviewed 40-year-old G--- village head, Saw K---, who described abusive practices perpetrated by the Tatmadaw in his village throughout the previous four year period, including forced labour, arbitrary taxation in the form of both goods and money, and obstructions to humanitarian relief, specifically medical care availability and education support. Saw K--- also discussed development projects and land confiscation that has occurred in the area, including one oil palm company that came to deforest 700 acres of land next to G--- village in order to plant oil palm trees, as well as the arrival of a Malaysian logging company, neither of which provided any compensation to villagers for the land that was confiscated. However, the Malaysian logging company did provide enough wood, iron nails and roofing material for one school in the village, and promised the villagers that it would provide additional support later. Saw K--- raised other concerns regarding the food security, health care and difficulties with providing education for children in the village. In order to address these issues, Saw K--- explained that villagers have met with the Ler Mu Lah Township leaders to solve land confiscation problems, but some G--- villagers have had to give up their land, including a full nursery of betel nut plantations, based on the company's claim that the plantations were illegally maintained.

Interview | Saw K---, (male, 40), G--- village, Ler Mu Lah Township, Mergui/Tavoy District (April 2012)

The following interview was conducted by a community member in Mergui/Tavoy District, and is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹This interview was received along with other information from Mergui/Tavoy District, including eight incident reports, and 13 other interviews.²

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

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Village Head and Hill field farmer

How many years ago did you get married?

I got married 28 years ago.

How many children do you have?

I have five children.

How old is your oldest child?

17-years-old.

How old is your youngest child?

Three-years-old.

How many years have you been the village head?

I have been the village head for four years.

What is your responsibility as you are village head?

I have to look after the village and develop the village.

When you became the village head, was it because you were willing, or did the SPDC [Tatmadaw]³ select you, or did the KNU [Karen National Union] select you?

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 Mergui/Tavoy District can be found in the report, "Tenasserim Situation Update: Te Naw Th' Ri Township," KHRG, April 2011.

³In 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 conducted this interview and interviewee and "SPDC" is therefore retained in the translation of this interview.

About becoming the village head, I didn't want to, and it was not the KNU that selected me; it was because the SPDC selected me.

Did you know the SPDC brigade which selected you?

I don't know.

What about the battalion?

I don't know.

Did you know the officer's name who came to select you?

They didn't come to select [villagers] by themselves, but they sent an order. His name is *Bo mu* [Major] Tin Hton, and the villagers agreed with him, so they selected me.

Which month was that?

In 2008.

Can you tell us the brief story of your experience, and your job role since you became the village head, please?

The experience from dealing with the SPDC from 2008, 2009 and 2010, I suffered very badly. But this year [2012] became much better.

Why did you have to suffer?

We suffered because at that time, [because] the KNU [Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)] came to operate in the area, so the SPDC came to find them out [their whereabouts] and questioned us.

Have you ever been punched or beaten?

I haven't ever been punched or beaten.

Which armed group was that [that came to locate the KNU]?

That armed group was the Burmese soldiers [Tatmadaw], but I don't remember the officer's name.

Did you remember the date when they did that?

I don't remember the date because I didn't notice the date. It already passed one year ago.

Do they still demand money in your village?

Yes, they still demand money.

Why do they demand [it]?

They demand [it from] us because when they ordered us to porter, we didn't go, so they fined us, then we had to pay them.

Did they demand [money] per village or per person?

They demanded it per household; 5,000 Kyat⁴ (US \$5.69) per household.

How many households are in your village?

There are [censored for security] households.

How many villagers do you have?

[Censored for security] villagers.

What are your villagers' occupations?

They just do hill farming. There is no other work.

Do they all have enough food from doing hill farming?

Not all of them have enough. Some have enough but some don't have enough. There are more villagers who don't have enough.

What do the villagers who do not have enough [food] do for their livelihood?

⁴As of July 3, 2012, all conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report are based on the official market rate of 878 Kyat to the 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.

They have to hire themselves [out] and they eat anything they get in a day.

What kind of jobs do they hire [for]?

In the past, the villagers were hiring each other but since the companies entered the village [G--- village], the villagers haven't hired each other. The company entered and hires people so the villagers go to work for the company, but they don't have enough [money] from hiring themselves [out] to the company.

Did you remember the date when the companies entered?

The companies entered in September 2011.

What was their plan when they entered? Will they plant something?

In the beginning, when they entered, they said they would do logging. But later they didn't only log, they deforested lands to plant oil palm [trees]. But in the beginning, they didn't include [in their plan] to plant oil palm. After they started logging and they built the road, they planned to plant oil palm. They deforested 700 acres of land to plant oil palm. They already deforested the land but they haven't planted oil palm yet.

When they deforested [the] land, did it include the villagers' lands?

Yes, it included many villagers' land.

Did they pay compensation?

They haven't paid compensation yet. But later, when we had meeting with the township [Ler Mu Lah] leader, because it relates to the township leader, the township leader met with them, so they said they would pay. They would buy if the villagers sold [land]. But at the beginning, they – the rich people – wholly didn't want to pay.

So now, if they really pay, how will they pay? Will they pay per acre?

Yes, they said they would pay per acre depending on how many acres. If the villagers report ten acres, they will pay for ten acres. They don't pay more than that.

How much they will pay for one acre?

One acre costs 40,000 Kyat (US \$45.56).

How many of the villagers' land in your village are included?

There are five villagers' land [that] were included. They are Naw P---, Saw B---, Saw H---, Saw D--- and Saw C---.

Do your villagers do business [from] which [they] get incoming money in other ways?

They don't have any extra work. They just hire themselves [out] and they eat what they get. They just do it like that. I haven't seen a villager who created a special business or do their own business.

How long has your village been established?

Since 2008.

Does your village have any problems?

We don't have special problems to face. There is just [that] we have to avoid when the SPDC enters the village. We don't face [anything] like physical injury.

When the SPDC enters the village, do they still take villagers' pigs, chickens, cows or buffalos?

If [there are] buffalos and pigs, they do take like that, but if [they want] chickens, they do ask [permission] from the villagers.

Do they pay the [fair] price?

They don't pay for the price often, but sometimes, if some Battalion Commander is kind, they do pay. But some Battalion Commanders don't pay. They just demand like that.

If they pay, do they pay per viss⁵ or per chicken?

They paid per viss.

How much do they pay per viss?

They pay 2,000 Kyat (US \$2.28) per viss because one viss of chicken costs 2,000 Kyat, but they do give [it] sometimes.

⁵ A viss is a unit of weight equivalent to 1.6 kg. / 3.52 lb.

Do you see the SPDC kill any one of the villagers a few days ago?

Over the past one or two years and currently in our area, we haven't seen or heard that they bullied people to death.

Did the SPDC order you to come back to build up the village, or did you come back to build up the village by yourself?

At the beginning, we escaped. And after that, we came back to stay in Hpgay Plaw, Ta Day Luh Hkoh and K'Waw Hta, but we couldn't suffer [it] because these places were other people's areas, so we asked to set up the village. When we went and asked them [the Tatmadaw], the Operation Commander gave us the opportunity to set up [the village]. It is not like they ordered us, but we asked their permission to live [there].

Did you have to pay money for setting up this village?

No, we didn't have to pay money for the lands. We only had to pay when we went and drank tea with them. We had to spend a little bit when we met with the leaders [Tatmadaw officers].

Have you ever portered for them?

Yes, I had to porter [for] three years. Only this year we haven't had to porter, because we don't have portering duty this year. In the previous three years, we had to porter the whole three years, once or twice per year.

When you had been portering, did they order per village?

Yes, they ordered per village. For our village, they ordered ten people per year because our village is small.

How did they arrange for people who weren't able to go?

For people who weren't able to go, we, the villagers, had to arrange it by ourselves because we had sympathy for them, so we left them [in the village] and also they [the Tatmadaw soldiers] didn't tell us anything. We looked for our villagers who are poor and who are sick, then we leave them.

Did they have to hire someone else because they weren't able to go?

No. We don't have that [practice] in our area, but there is [the practice] in T'Pgoh Hkee and K'Weh villages. Only in our village, we don't force people who aren't able to go. Sometimes,

we asked 3,000 (US \$3.42), 4,000 (US \$4.56) or sometimes 5,000 Kyat (US \$5.69) from them as assistance.

Did you pass any village when you portered for Burmese soldiers?

We passed only U Thoo Kloh village.

Did they [Tatmadaw] make trouble for the villagers when they entered the village?

I didn't see them make trouble for the villagers when we went.

Did you see them take villagers' chickens?

No, I didn't see that.

Did they rape female villagers?

No.

Was there any fighting happening when you were portering?

No, there was no fighting happening when we were portering. We could go smoothly.

Is there a school in your village?

Yes, the school opens every year.

How many standards [are taught] in the school?

We extend to three standards.

How many students are there in the school?

There are only 20 students in [the school] this year. Most students are in kindergarten, and there are 2 or 3 students in Grade 1, amongst 20 students.

Did the villagers, or the SPDC, or the KNU build up this school?

The SPDC ordered us to build up the school, then we built [it] up. It looks nice if there is school in the village so we built [it] up by our self.

How many teachers are there in the school?

There have been three teachers; one [new] teacher per year.

How much do the villagers have to pay for teacher's salary, per year?

For the teacher's salary, the SPDC government doesn't hire for us. We, the villagers, have to hire [them] by ourselves. We have to provide 40 baskets of paddy⁶ (836 kg. / 2,816 lb.) to only one teacher per a year.

Are you able to provide [paddy] every year?

For some teachers, we can provide every year, but for some we can't.

Is there any help from other [groups of] people?

No, only the villagers have to provide [paddy]. For the 40 baskets of paddy [they] are just paddy seeds. We also have to provide one big tin of paddy grain (10.45 kg. / 23.04 lb) and a half viss (0.8 kg. / 1.76 lb) of shrimp paste and one viss of salt per household. We have to help them by our selves. It means we hire a person who is worth hiring.

How much is the school fee per student?

For the school fee, we have to give 2,000 Kyat (US \$2.28) per student.

Who do you have to give [it] to?

We have to give to a female schoolteacher. We give her money and send students to her.

How does she use it?

She uses it for to buy books for the students, and provides them to the students.

Can your school run peacefully?

Yes, the school can run peacefully if the female schoolteacher is nice. There is no difficulty in studying.

Is there any opportunity in your school to teach the Karen language?

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

We have not done that before. I did it [taught in Karen] in 2001 and I prepared for [teaching in] Karen language, but the SPDC hasn't allowed us since. They said, they don't want to hear [about teaching the Karen language]. But in 2002, I didn't hear any information about that. We didn't hear anything from them.

Does the SPDC or KNU [KNLA] ever come to make trouble, or bother your school?

No, that never happens. The KNU never come to make trouble for us; they come to encourage us to develop the school⁷.

Do your students receive any special help from the Burmese government, SPDC, someone, or any rich people?

No, that never happens. The parents have to struggle by themselves. There is no outside help.

Is there a hospital in your village?

No, there is no hospital.

Where do you go to heal the villagers who are sick, if there is no hospital in the village?

We look after each other in the village but if [an illness] becomes worse, then we go to the Htee Hpoh Hta [village].

What kind of disease most occurs in your village?

Mostly, malaria and hypertension.

Can the villagers work peacefully?

I think they can do hill farming peacefully, but flat farms we don't even do. Since the village was built they have been able to do hill farming peacefully. It depends on the person who tries to work.

Do they have enough food?

⁷ While the villager said Karen National Union, in this context it is likely he is referring to the political party's armed forces, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).

No, they don't have enough food. Most people don't have enough food. There are fewer people who have enough food, but more people who don't have enough food. For example, if there are 20 households then, [there will be] only five households which have enough food. There are no more than ten households that have enough food.

How much do you have buy for one big tin of rice?

One big tin costs [between] 4,500 Kyat (US \$5.13) to 5,000 Kyat (US \$5.69), but I haven't bought any yet; I saw other people buy one big tin for 5,000 Kyat.

How much does one viss of meat cost?

One viss of meat costs 2,500 Kyat (US \$2.85).

Since you became the village head, have the villagers provided you with food or have you had to work by yourself?

There is no way for the villagers to provide you [with food] as you become a village head. We have to work by our self. We [village heads] have to do [work] even when we aren't available. The villagers don't look after us, but sometimes they help us with extra work one time per a day. The villagers don't [provide] support for food or paddies. We have to think of the way, and do it by our self.

Have you seen the SPDC come to develop the village?

That never happens. They give orders only, but they don't come to do [anything] by themselves. They order [us] to build up the school and clean the village. They never come to develop it by themselves.

How do you see the attitude of the KNU?

For the KNU, when they come, they don't act badly towards us. Everything goes smoothly. They don't ever say something bad to us.

Do they come to demand villager's things in the village like SPDC?

No, they don't ever demand anything by force. They do eat when we provide [food] for them, but they don't eat if we don't provide [food] for them.

Do you want to tell more information about your experience, or your feelings about the SPDC, KNU, or problems with your livelihood?

I don't have any special problem to report; we suffered in the past, but now we don't have to suffer anymore. Now, they [Tatmadaw] don't come and treat us badly, [such] as scold us. I don't know about the other villages, but in my village they don't come and scold us. I haven't seen the SPDC come to our village and scold us, so I can't report anything that is special. We do say the truth. We never say things wrong. I haven't seen the SPDC come [to my village] in 2012. I haven't heard them scold us. I even went to their place [an army camp near G--- village], but they didn't tell me anything. I also met with their Operation Commander, but he didn't say anything special or bad to us. He said the time now is peaceful; they don't have to fight anymore.⁸

What about the company? Is there any support for the village when they come to the village?

We don't get any support from the oil palm company. But from the logging company, which is a Malaysian company, they support us with wood for the school. They said, "these trees are growing here, so while we enter your places we will help you as we should." And this year, they would give enough wood to build a school, and also roof. We don't have to buy iron nails, and they provided everything. We only have to build. In the next year, they planned that if the school is built, they would support us with money. Currently, they said they would [provide] support for only one school. If there is anything needed, they would support when it is needed.

When the company and rich people enter your village, do they confiscate villagers' lands ruthlessly, including lands where villagers have sown seeds?

That does not include sown-seed land, but it does include two villagers' [individual] land, where they already planted nursery betel nut⁹ plantations, approximately 100 to 200 betel nut plants. It does not include plantations that can produce fruits.

⁸ It is likely the Tatmadaw Operations Commander was referring to the ceasefire agreement signed between the KNU and RUM officials on January 12th 2011 in Pa'an Town, which was an agreement in principle on '11 key points', to be followed by more in-depth talks after 45 days. Senior KNU officials have since announced that the deadline of 45 days is unlikely to be met; see: "KNU ceasefire meeting with government behind schedule," Karen News, February 23rd 2012. Meanwhile, as-yet-unpublished KHRG information received on February 19th 2012, suggests that there have been clashes between government forces and non-state armed groups in Pa'an District in February 2012 and that recent re-supply operations carried out by Tatmadaw forces in Nyaunglebin District exceeded the amount of supplies usually sent, and included heavy artillery. Local media sources have also reported ongoing fighting in Pa'an and Nyaunglebin Districts since January 12th 2012; see: "Killings and attacks between DKBA and BGF drives villagers from their homes," Karen News, February 24th 2012; "Ceasefires, Continued Attacks and a Friendly Encounter Between Enemies," Free Burma Rangers, February 3rd 2012.

⁹In Burmese, "betelnut" and "betel leaf" are referred to as "konywet" and "konthih," as if they are from the same plant. The Burmese names are also commonly used by Karen language speakers. "Betel nut" is the seed from an Areca Palm tree, areca catechu; "Betel leaf" is the leaf of the Piper betel vine, belonging to the piperaceae

How many acres of land do you think there were, including nursery betel nut plantations?

I think there were six acres of land, which include nursery betel nut plantations, with two owners.

Do you think they will pay?

No, they won't pay. They said that they won't pay. And also, vegetation in the nursery plantations has not been cleared yet; they [the plantations] are in the bushes, so they [company] said it is illegal. When they said it was illegal, the villagers didn't say anything.

Do they demand villagers' pigs or chickens for free when they enter the village?

No, they never demand [those] for free. If the rich people come, they buy by [those] themselves. The chickens become fewer because they buy [them] often.

How much do they pay for one *viss*?

They pay 4,000 Kyat per *viss* (US \$4.56). Now, the chickens' price increased, so they pay 4,000 Kyat per *viss*.

Is there anything else you want to report?

I don't have anything else to report because this relates to the rich people and their own jobs.

Thank you for telling me information from your experience and suffering.

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

- “Tenasserim Situation Update: Te Naw Th’Ri Township, May to September 2011,” (December 2011)
- “Tenasserim Interview: Saw T---, December 2010,” (October 2011)
- “Tenasserim Interview: Saw P---, Received in May 2011,” (October 2011)
- “Tenasserim Interview: Saw K---, August 2011,” (September 2011)
- “Tenasserim Interview: Saw C---, Received in May 2011,” (September 2011)
- “Tenasserim Situation Update: Te Naw Th’Ri Township,” (April 2011)



TENASSERIM DIVISION
Map by KHRG (Karen Human Rights Group)



Legend

- Village (not all shown)
- Large village / town
- Refugee Camp
- ★ SPDC Army bases (not all shown)
- Vehicle road
- New road
- Railway
- ⋯ Karen township boundaries
- District/National Boundaries
- River
- Gas Pipeline

