



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Saw E---, July 2012

This report contains the full transcript of an interview submitted to KHRG during July 2012, which was conducted in Mergui-Tavoy District by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The community member interviewed 45-year-old G--- villager, Saw E---, who described the destruction of agricultural land, including betel nut and coconut plantations in G--- village resulting from construction of a vehicle road by the Italian-Thai Development Company (ITD). Saw E--- raises concerns regarding the lack of compensation for damaged agricultural land and crops. He also raises his concerns that relocation will be necessary, as the road will continue to be built and is set to cross his land. Further, Saw E--- describes villagers' strategies in response, including requesting ITD to provide compensation for the value of crops lost in road construction, this compensation was promised by the company, but is yet to be received. This report, and others, will be published in March 2013 as part of KHRG's thematic report: Losing Ground: Land conflicts and collective action in eastern Myanmar.

Interview | Saw E--- (male, 45), G--- village, Mergui-Tavoy District (July 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.¹ This interview was received along with other information from Mergui-Tavoy District, including, two other interviews, and 424 photographs.²

Occupation: Farmer

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 2013. In the meantime, KHRG's most recently-published field information from Tenasserim District can be found in the report, "Complaint letter to Burma government about value of agricultural land destroyed by Tavoy highway," KHRG, July 2012.

What do the villagers in this village mostly do for their livelihood?

I could say that none of the [G---] villagers have enough food. Some of them hire themselves out because they are poor. If there are people to hire them, then they hire themselves out. They just do it like that.

Currently, I would like to know, are there human rights abuses occurring in your village and your area?

Currently, the problem that we have to deal with is from the big country's [Thailand's] work on this road.

When did the road construction begin?

This road was built here in August 2010.

Do you know why they built this road?

I don't know about that.

In your opinion, what do you think they built it for?

This road is related to the rich people. But there is no opportunity for us, citizens.

Did they ever inform [villagers] that this road would be constructed?

They did not say that they would construct the road when they arrived here. They set up their location [construction site] and they asked the village head.

Could you please tell us more about who came to construct this road, as you know?

We heard that a group who came to do research is the Thai-Italian [Italian-Thai Development Company (ITD)], and that they would start to do [construct the deep sea port road].

What did they start to do?

The Italian (ITD Company) [started to] work.

Because this road is built in this village and in this area, please tell us what things have been damaged in this village?

Because they repaired this little road, the things that were damaged are betel nut³, coconut and palm trees, and gardens.

Based on the damage, what did the company [community member paused]. What did the person in charge of the construction of the road say? We would like to know if they said anything to the villagers.

They said that, "When this road is open [undergoing construction], record the *thay htee wa boh* [trees and bamboo] that you own, and later [you] will get compensation."

Did they ever pay anything as they said they would provide compensation later?

They have not paid anything yet.

Did they ever discuss with the local people and villagers that they would begin constructing this road?

No.

I want to know more about the views of the local people and villagers regarding this road?

There is no view from the villagers regarding this road. They just believe that it would damage their things, and some are very sad.

Do they want this road to be built, or what do they want?

None of them want this road to be built. Some are sad and planned to sell their land [because they know that] the road will cross their plantation [when construction continues and reaches their plantation].

What things do you think will be damaged if the road is built and currently [what are the problems that] you have to deal with related to this road?

For me, in my view and my understanding, there will be more damage if this road is completely built. The first thing is, both the forest, which is a natural habitat in our village, and our area will be damaged. We can use it [materials in the forest] for our villagers and citizens if it is not damaged. The second thing is, the rivers would definitely be damaged. We can't drink the fresh

³ In 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 family.

water anymore. And another thing, the trees will be damaged and will become useless for us. And in our village, if it [the road] is completely finished, our village would certainly be damaged.

If the road in your village is successful, how do you think you will live if you have to relocate?

We don't know how we will live if the relocation happens. I think the villagers [in G---] would disperse out.

We would like to know, how do you want to live your life in the future?

For us, because currently we can rely on the natural habitat; we can eat well and we can easily find vegetables to eat, so we want to live as our grandparents did in the past.

Please, tell us clearly about the villagers' concerns related to this road, which we have not asked you yet?

The first thing is, the villagers want compensation for the trees that were damaged by this road. If they do not get compensation now, they believe that the company will never pay them.

Do you have any other things that you want to tell us?

The other things is just that, the life we live now is such that we can no longer work for our livelihoods as we worked in the past. We have to deal [with the fact] that if we can't stay in our own land; we can't live. We can't easily find frogs, fish, meat and vegetables anymore.

Have they ever told you that they would arrange for the relocation and crops?

They said so, but we – villagers, citizens – discussed this with the people in charge, and asked them, but they haven't paid us money or anything. We dare not believe them because we haven't seen anything.

Thank you, tee [uncle].

Further background on the current situation in Mergui-Tavoy District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- “Complaint letter to Burma government about value of agricultural land destroyed by Tavoy highway,” (July 2012)

- “Mergui-Tavoy Interview: Saw K---, April 2012,” (July 2012)
- “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)

