



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

June 6, 2014 / KHRG #12-101-A3-I1

Hpa-an Interview: Saw B---, July 2012

This Interview with Saw B--- describes events occurring in Nabu Township, Hpa-an District, during the period between 2011 and 2012, including forced recruitment; arbitrary taxation and demands; concerns about the ceasefire process; and drug production, usage and sale.

- *The DKBA continued to arbitrarily tax local communities and make demands for money and soldiers, even after the DKBA's transformation into Tatmadaw Border Guard Forces; a village head and religious leaders were complicit in the process of taxation.*
- *The interviewee describes his views on the ceasefire agreement, which he considers to be a strategic move by the Burma government to expand control into Karen areas.*
- *The BGF produces and sells a form of methamphetamine, referred to as yaba, which is reportedly taken by a large group of local adolescents in Nabu Township.*

This Interview was initially published in May 2014 in the Appendix of KHRG's in-depth report, [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response in Southeast Myanmar since the 2012 ceasefire](#).

Interview | Saw B---, (male, 49), A--- village, Nabu Township, Hpa-an District (July 2012)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. It was conducted in Hpa-an District on July 2nd 2012 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 Hpa-an District, including ten other interviews and 81 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Hill field 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. For additional reports categorized by Type, Issue, Location and Year, please see the Related Readings component following each report on KHRG's redesigned Website.

Position: Villager

How many children do you have?

I have three children.

How many girls and boys?

One boy and two girls.

How old is your oldest child?

My oldest child is 25 years old.

So you got married early?

Yes, I got married when I was 24 years old.

How old is your youngest child?

My youngest child is eight years old.

In which village tract³ and township is C--- located?

It is located in Township #3, [known as] Kawkareik Township.⁴

Can you tell me about the problems that the C--- villagers have?

The problems are [caused by] the yellow scarves⁵ [the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA)]⁶ and the BGF [Tatmadaw-Border Guard Force (BGF)]⁷, who demand money and soldiers [recruits].

The yellow scarves also demand [money]?

³ A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

⁴ Kawkareik Township in the Myanmar government map corresponds to Nabu Township, Hpa-an District in the locally-defined Karen districts map (see maps on KHRG Website).

⁵ "Yellow Scarves" is a term commonly used by villagers to denote the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), in reference to the yellow scarves that form part of their uniform.

⁶ The Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), formerly the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, was formed in December 1994 and was originally a breakaway group from the KNU/KNLA that signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burma government and directly cooperated at times with Tatmadaw forces. The formation of the DKBA was led by monk U Thuzana with the help and support of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the name of the military government in Burma at that time. For more information on the formation of the DKBA, see "Inside the DKBA," KHRG, 1996. The DKBA now refers to a splinter group from those DKBA forces reformed as Tatmadaw Border Guard Forces, also remaining independent of the KNLA. As of April 2012, the DKBA changed its name from "Buddhist" to "Benevolent" to reflect its secularity.

⁷ Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions of the Tatmadaw were established in 2010, and they are composed mostly of soldiers from former non-state armed groups, such as older constellations of the DKBA, which have formalised ceasefire agreements with the Burmese government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw. BGF battalions are assigned four digit battalion numbers, whereas regular Tatmadaw infantry or light infantry battalions are identified by two or three-digit battalion numbers. For more information, see "DKBA officially becomes Border Guard Force" Democratic Voice of Burma, August 2010, and, "Exploitation and recruitment under the DKBA in Pa'an District," KHRG, June 2009.

No. It was before the yellow scarves transformed themselves into the Border Guard Force.

When was the period before the yellow scarves transformed [from the DKBA into the BGF]?

It was five years ago when they [the DKBA] demanded the soldiers. At first they said that they would only need them for one year, but later they asked for an extension and demanded soldiers each year.

Why did they [the DKBA] demand money?

They demanded soldiers and we had to hire [the soldiers] for them.

They [the DKBA] demanded soldiers?

Yes, the villagers had to hire [the soldiers] for them.

How much did you have [to pay] to hire one soldier?

We had to pay 700,000 kyat (US \$709.21)⁸ per soldier per month and there were 20 soldiers.

You mean 700,000 kyat (US \$709.21) for one soldier?

The 700,000 kyat (US \$709.21) was for one soldier.

So, 14,000,000 kyat (US \$14,118.40) for 20 soldiers?

Yes. That was for the first year.

Did this happen five years ago?

It happened seven years [ago], when my child was [still] a kid. They punished us when people attacked them [the Tatmadaw]. Officer Ta Mway was in command at that time and it was the period before he died and [before he was] transferred to the yellow scarves [became a DKBA soldier]. We tried to ambush him for many years, whenever there was a chance, [but the ambush] hit his wife.

How many years ago did that happen?

It was ten years ago. They arrested me three years later.

How many armed groups are currently active in A--- village?

Only the yellow scarves.

Are they still called the yellow scarves?

Before they were called the yellow scarves.

What about now?

⁸ As of January 13th 2013, all conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report are based on the official market rate of 987 kyat to the US \$1.

Now they are called the BGF.

Do you know the battalion number of the BGF?

The Battalion number is #999⁹ and is led by Major K'Toh based in Taung Thon Lon [army camp].

Do you know what their battalion number is?

I think that Battalion #999 and Battalion #3 are active in T'Nay Hsah [Nabu Township].

Is it Battalion #999?

Yes, it is Battalion #999 and the commander's name is Maung Ngway He.

Is he the battalion commander?

I'm not sure if he is the battalion commander or the second-in-command. I think he is the second-in-command. I saw that he has three stars like the Burmese star [that represents the Tatmadaw].

So the Border Guard Force is there. What about the others? Are there any other groups?

No. There is no other group.

What about the KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] soldiers? Have they been there [A--- village]?

The KNU [Karen National Union]? They were here once during dry season.

What about the Tatmadaw? Have they been there [A--- village]?

I usually don't see the Tatmadaw around there.

Are there any Border Guard Force army camps around there [A--- village]?

No. They are based in Taung Thon Lo, because the monk and the village head cooperate with the Border Guard Force.

Has the Border Guard Force in your village pressured the civilians in 2011 and 2012?

[Inaudible].

You said that you paid more than 100,000 kyat (US \$101.32) the first time?

105,000 kyat (US \$106.38).

What about the second time?

⁹ While the villager said Battalion #999, he is actually referring to a BGF Battalion. Battalion #999 was a DKBA Battalion led by Maung Chit Thu before it was transformed into a Tatmadaw BGF Battalion in September 2010.

95,000 kyat (US \$96.25).

Was there any other time?

There were five times altogether. One time we had to pay 75,000 kyat (US \$75.99). The amount that we had to pay was 7,000 (US \$7.09) or 8,000 kyat (US \$8.11), [at a time] when many people didn't have enough food.

How many times did you have to pay?

I had to pay them once per year.

So it depends on how much money you had to pay. Sometimes you had to pay a lot and sometimes a little?

Yes. We still have to pay the soldiers' salary for this year: 17,500 kyat (US \$17.73) per household.

When did you have to pay? How many months ago?

I think it was two months ago. They continued to hire the soldiers who remained in the army. Most of them are discharged because they already completed their three-years commitment. After they complete a five- or three year-commitment, [the soldiers] that want can be discharged. But those who remain have to continue being a soldier and we have to pay them money. I believe that there are four or five people left [in the military] from the Htee Hpoh Kyaw village tract.

Did you have to send other people when there were four or five left [villagers who remained in the military]?

Because there are people [certain people in the village who are trusted by the BGF, for example religious leaders] who guarantee for us, we don't have to pay.

Do they still demand?

They demanded before the raining season.

They demanded soldiers?

Yes.

How did the villagers respond when they demanded [soldiers]?

The villagers didn't want to provide them anymore. But the village head said he already paid [the BGF], so it was confusing where the money was going at that time.

The village head already paid?

Yes, the village head said that he already paid, so he couldn't collect money from the villagers. The villagers told him that it was too complicated.

So the village head gave the money without discussing it with the villagers?

He advanced the money.

When they [the BGF] demanded soldiers this year, did the people [villagers] provide them?

Yes. We gave them money to hire the four remaining soldiers.

Are there any other problems?

The other problem is the monk and village head's work.

Can you tell me why?

The village head collects money all the time and gives many reasons, such as, "*You have to pay the yellow scarves and [make a] donation for the monk's monastery construction.*" The monk cooperates with the BGF and if something happens in the village, he [the monk] asks them [the BGF] to come here.

What about that one [the interviewer points at the school construction]. How much money did you have to pay?

For the school construction, I heard that they [village leaders] would collect 3,000 kyat (US \$3.04) per month. The villagers do not want to pay 3,000 kyat per month and they complain a lot. I think they won't collect the 3,000 kyat per month.

Has anyone paid?

No one has paid yet.

What is the name of your A--- village head?

Maung D---.

Is he Karen?

Pwo Karen.

How old is he?

Around 50 years old.

What about the monk?

His name is Neh Hpah Thee Doo. Because the villagers do not have any knowledge, they have to suffer like this. People have to pay when they [the monks] demand something. Also when people went to a meeting [called for by a monk], he [the monk] demanded 40 *viss* (64 kg. / 140.8 lb.)¹⁰ of pork. People [the villagers] provided 20 *viss* (32 kg. / 70.4 lb.) of pork to the monk and the soldiers provided 20 *viss* of pork. After the villagers returned [from the meeting], they calculated the expenses. The soldiers went [to the meeting] and spent more than 500,000 kyat (US \$506.58) and demanded [that sum] from the villagers.

Did the villagers pay?

¹⁰ A *viss* is a unit of weight equivalent to 1.6 kg. or 3.52 lb

The villagers from [around] here have not paid yet. I don't not know about the other four villages in which they demanded [money]. They divided the [amount] in pieces and asked 150,000 kyat (US \$151.97) from each village.

So they divided the price of 40 viss of pork?

Yes. It was [the money that] the soldiers spent.

Were they KNU soldiers?

Yes.

Do the villagers know about that?

Some of them know, but others do not know.

Can the villagers travel at night time?

Yes, you can travel at night time now. But we did not dare to travel in the past.

How long ago did the people not dare to go?

It was before the ceasefire in January 2012.¹¹ We did not dare to go anywhere in the past and we did not dare to light a torch.

What are the villagers' views on the ceasefire?

Some people who know about the ceasefire are happy, while the people who do not know about it sometimes trust you when you tell them [about the ceasefire], but sometimes they do not trust you.

Do they say something because they do not trust [the ceasefire]?

Yes. They [the villagers] said that they [the KNU] just go for the ceasefire and they do not know [realise] how the enemy [the Tatmadaw] will bully us later. Especially the *kya khine yay* [the solidarity group that belongs to the USDP]¹² is destructive.

Is there *kya khine yay* in your village?

There are more than 30 members of *kya khine yay*.

Do they set up their office?

No, their office is in Kawkareik [Township].

So they just come [to the village] like that?

¹¹ On January 12th 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and Burma government in Hpa-an, the capital of Kayin State. The exact terms for a long-term peace plan are still under negotiation. For updates on the peace process, see the [KNU Stakeholder webpage on the Myanmar Peace Monitor website](#). For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response in Southeast Myanmar since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014.

¹² Union Solidarity and Development Party (*Pyi Khaing Pyo* in Burmese, *Pa Ka Hpa* in Karen) is the successor of the USDA.

They have four leaders with an office [in Kawkareik]. The rest of their members have to meet their leaders and sign when they have an event.

Are the *kya khine yay* members Karen?

They are Pwo Karen.

What do they do when they come to A--- village?

They do nothing.

Do they demand money?

No, they don't demand money. There is one group which provides money for the students. I don't know their name. They bring the student books.

Do you know the name UNICEF [United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund]?

Yes, it was UNICEF.

How many times have they been in A--- village?

They come once a month. They came once a month during this monsoon season.

Is there a school in A--- village?

Yes, there is a school.

How many standards are taught?

Last year, it extended to grade seven, but the school [only] taught [until] grade six this year. They [UNICEF] demolished the old school to re-build a new school.

How many schoolteachers are there?

There is one male teacher and [there are] four female teachers.

Only five teachers for seven grades?

Yes, there are only five schoolteachers from KG-A¹³ [kindergarten] until grade seven. There are four schools. There is one school in each section. There is one school in the Kwee Maw Teh [village] and it teaches up to grade four. There is also one school in T'Kaw Pga Ya [village] and it teaches up to grade four. The students have to go to A--- [village] when they are in grades five and six.

Are they [these schools] considered to be the middle school?

They are recognised as [being] bigger [schools].

What kind of livelihood do the villagers in Htee Hpoh Kyaw village tract have?

¹³ In Myanmar government schools, between nursery and grade-1; they teach kindergarten-A and kindergarten-B. The students can only continue grade-1 after they pass these two levels.

They work on flat farms.

Is there any other thing?

There is nothing else. They only do [work on] flat farms and plantations.

What kind of plantations?

They plant vegetables such as beans, and peanuts in summer.

Do you want to report any issue, which I have not yet asked you about?

No. People asked me to come here because they do not dare to come.

Is there anything that you feel unhappy about and that you have not yet told me?

We have suffered enough in the past. We have suffered when the people [armed groups] fined us. Currently, we have to suffer because of the village head. He dislikes us. He dislikes me because I tell the truth and dare to speak.

Can you tell me how that happened?

About the village head?

Yes, between you and your village head.

The case [problem] between the village head and me started because of catching fish. His people [followers] caught [all] the fish and I told them. And [since that moment] he dislikes me.

They caught fish in the river?

Yes. They blocked the river and took all the fish. In the past, when people blocked the river, they would share the fish with the [other] villagers. The money that the villagers would earn from fishing would be used for celebrations in the village. But they [the village head's followers] sometimes block the river and take the fish in daytime or during the night time.

They [the village head's people] did not let the villagers take the fish?

No.

Then you told them.

When I told him [the village head], he said that he would cut my throat and I told him, *"Just go ahead and cut my throat."* I'm not afraid of that village head.

Is everything okay now?

It's just going on like this. I am doing my own thing. I don't care about that [the threatening].

Are there any drugs used in your area?

There are many young people... [villager paused]. People sold it in the past, but not anymore. We just say that there is nothing, but I think that people still sell it secretly. I think there is a lot along the vehicle road.

What kind of drug?

It is *yaba*.¹⁴

Do you know many villagers in A--- [village] who use it?

Yes. There are a lot of adolescents who use it.

Don't people forbid them?

Their parents forbid them, but they cannot [make them stop].

What about the village [head] in charge or the Border Guard Force?

The Border Guard Force is the one who distributes it. Their parents and siblings sell it. No one else dares to sell it [because they are afraid of the BGF].

Was there not an order released that says, 'do not sell and do not buy [yaba]'? Have you heard about that?

I have heard [about it], but it [the warning] does not reach there [to the village]. People do sell [yaba] there.

Who did you hear it from?

I heard it on a radio advertisement. I heard that people were arrested along the borderline [Burma-Thailand border]. People sell bad things [yaba] because they produce it.

Do they [the BGF] own [yaba] factories?

Yes.

Where are they located?

They are located in Battalion #3, T'Nay Hsah [Nabu] side in Don La, which is also called Yoh Klah. Their two factories produce it in T'Nay Hsah and Noh Hpa Baw, and [the factories also] reach from Mya P'Teh to Kawkareik [town]. I think it [the selling] will reach to the other side of the mountain. His [BGF #1016 Battalion Commander Mya Khaing] co-workers who make the drugs are from Mya P'Teh [village].

What about the village head? Doesn't he impose a rule that the villagers cannot use and buy [drugs]?

They do, but we can't tell [force] the young boys nowadays. There are many adolescents and men who have two or three children use the drug.

¹⁴ *Yaba*, which means "crazy medicine" in Thai, is a tablet form of methamphetamine. First developed in East Asia during World War II to enhance soldiers' performance, methamphetamine has become increasingly popular in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia Vietnam, and in Burma where it is typically manufactured. See "Yaba, the 'crazy medicine of East Asia," *UNODC*, May 2008.

Do they work well if they use it?

I don't know. Some people said that they took five to ten tablets [of yaba]. They use it for fun. One tablet costs 3,000 kyat (US \$3.04).

I don't have any [more] questions, but if you want to tell me something you can tell me now.

Further background reading on the situation in Hpa-an District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- "Hpa-an Situation Update: Nabu Township, September to October 2013," (June 2014)
- "Hpa-an Incident Report: Extrajudicial killing in Paingkyon Township, June 2013," (May 2014)
- *Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response in Southeast Myanmar since the 2012 ceasefire*, (May 2014)
- "Hpa-an Situation Update: Lu Pleh Township, 2012 to 2013," (February 2014)
- "Incident Report: Two children injured from DKBA and BGF fighting in Hlaing Bwe, April 2013," (October 2013)

