



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

August 1, 2014 / KHRG #13-124-A1-I1

Hpapun Interview: Naw S---, September 2013

This Interview with Naw S--- describes events occurring in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District, occurring since the January 2012 ceasefire between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burma government, including militarisation, ceasefire concerns, forced labour and a landmine incident.

- *Naw S--- reported that the Tatmadaw soldiers continue to rotate and transport rations in the Hkaw Bu village tract area and demand that, as the village head, she provide them with rice, chilli, fish and other items without payment.*
 - *Villagers are forced to work as guides for Tatmadaw soldiers when they travel between their army bases; sometimes 10,000 or 20,000 kyat (US \$10.27 or \$20.53) is provided to the guide. In early 2012, one villager stepped on a KNLA landmine while serving as a guide for the Tatmadaw and died as a result; his family was provided with less than 100,000 (US \$102.67) as compensation. Naw S--- reported that, overall, forced labour demands have decreased in the past two to three years.*
 - *The Burma government has offered to provide some support for education, healthcare and food, but the KNU and local community have not allowed it, despite being in need of food and lacking adequate healthcare and education facilities. According to Naw S---, the community in her area feels that those services will not be provided properly or with good intentions.*
-

Interview | Naw S---, (Female, 29), T--- village, Hkaw Bu village tract, Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District (September 2013)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. It was conducted in Hpapun District in September 2013, 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 Hpapun District, including one other interview and 25 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Married

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 categorised by Type, Issue, Location and Year, please see the Related Readings component following each report on KHRG's Website.

Occupation: Farming a hill field

Position: Village head



This photo, taken in September 2nd 2013 in T---village, Hkaw Bu village tract, Bu Tho Township, Papun District, shows N S---, T---'s village head, who described the landmine incident, forced labour and concerns regarding the situation following the ceasefire. [Photo: KHRG]

What is your name?

Naw S---.

How old are you?

29.

Where do you live?

T---village.

What is the name of your township?

Bu Tho Township.

What about district?

Mu Traw [Hpapun] District.

In which village tract do you live?

Hkaw Bu village tract.

What is your responsibility and work?

My work and responsibility is to live between and communicate with both the Burmese [Tatmadaw] and Karen soldiers.

Are you a village head?

Yes, I am a village head.

Are you married?

Yes, I am.

How many children do you have?

One child.

Boy or girl?

Boy.

Have you seen any human right abuses in Hkaw Bu village tract and in your village, in the past or present?

There were so many human rights abuses in the past, but we cannot remember everything. We can say that the enemy, the Burmese [Tatmadaw], does not visit our village very often currently. Mostly they come [to the villages] when they are transporting rations and in the summer time. The number coming [to the villages] is reduced in the monsoon season. Sometimes, they come and cook in our house. Once, I was not in the house and they came to my house and cooked there. They caught an iguana on the way when they were coming, and they cooked it and left what they didn't eat in the pot. I found that my pot was very dirty. They also ate my coconuts. Sometimes, they asked permission from me and sometimes they did not ask permission and they climbed up the coconut tree by themselves.

How do they transport their rations?

They depart from Hpapun [and travel to] to Hkaw Bu, and then [from] Hkaw Bu to Ka Hee Kyoh camp, and then onward.

Onward to where?

They send it [rations] to Kyaw Yan camp and Ta Law Thaw camp, but I am not sure. There are two or three camps beyond Ka Hee Kyoh camp.

What do they call this place?

They called it Ta Heh camp. There are three more camps if we continue going, but I do not know what they call them.

Where are they [Tatmadaw] from?

The Tatmadaw who came and bought things [at her house] are from Hpapun. The Burmese [Tatmadaw] who sent the rations were the LID [Light Infantry Division].³

From which Light Infantry Division?

³ Light Infantry Division (Tatmadaw); commanded by a brigadier general, each with ten light infantry battalions specially trained in counter-insurgency, jungle warfare, "search and destroy" operations against ethnic insurgents and narcotics-based armies. LIDs are organised under three Tactical Operations Commands, commanded by a colonel, (three battalions each and one reserve), one field artillery battalion, one armoured squadron and other support units. As of 2000, each LID has its own organic field artillery units.

They came with different soldiers. LID #44 came and LID #11 came too.

What about the soldiers who came from Hpapun city?

The soldiers from Hpapun rotate every six months. Sometimes, LIB [Light Infantry Battalion]⁴ #341 come, sometimes LIB #348 and sometimes IB [Infantry Battalion]⁵ #19.

You said that they came and cooked food at your house sometimes, right?

Yes, they cooked.

Did they use their rice for cooking?

No. They used my rice for cooking.

Did they pay you the price of the rice?

No, they did not. They also used our chili and everything.

Did they pay the price for that [chili and the other things] as well?

No, they did not pay. They said that I have to treat them because I am the village head. They [the Tatmadaw] go and buy dry fish or cans of fish, then come back and cook if we have no curry.

Have you seen the rotation of the Tatmadaw this summer?

Yes, they do. They rotated once in the summer and once in the monsoon season.

When did they rotate?

They rotated in the last two months.

Are they [the Tatmadaw] from Hpapun city?

Yes, they are the Burmese [Tatmadaw] from Hpapun.

Where have they rotated?

They went to their camp.

To Hkaw Bu camp?

Yes. The soldiers who have to go to Hkaw Bu camp go there, and those who have to go to Ka Hee Kyoh camp go there.

Did they ask the villagers to work for them?

⁴ Light Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprised of 500 soldiers. However, most Light Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Primarily for offensive operations but sometimes used for garrison duties.

⁵ Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprised of 500 soldiers. However, most Infantry Battalions in the Tatmadaw are under-strength with less than 200 soldiers. Primarily for garrison duty but sometimes used in offensive operations.

They have always asked the villagers to guide them to the camps, including during the last two or three years. I think it is reducing this year.

Do they pay them money?

Sometimes they give 10,000 kyat or 20,000 kyat (US \$10.27 or \$20.53)⁶ to the people who guide them. They do not give them a lot of money.

Do they ask the villagers to build the camp for them?

No, they do not. They asked the villagers to do it for them in the past, in 1994 and 1995.

Do you have a clinic in your village?

No, we do not have a clinic. We have people who are selling medicines, and we go and buy from them.

What do people do if their illness is very serious?

Some people try to get treatment here [from medics], and people send them to the clinic if the medic cannot heal the patients.

To which clinic do they send the patients?

Some people go to Toh They Der village and some people go to Oo Thoo Kloh village. Mostly I go to Oo Thoo Kloh village and I do not go to Toh They Der village because it is very far away.

Do you have to pay money if you go to the clinic?

We do not need to pay money [the clinic is supported by the Karen National Union (KNU)].

Is there a school in your village?

Yes, we have a school.

Until which standard [grade] does the school teach?

Until seventh standard.

How many teachers are there?

I think we have ten or eight teachers.

Do you know their names?

I think I know. Let me count. We have *Thara* [male teacher] Bo Ka Su, *Thara* Saw Wah and the other *Thara* who is very tall. I forgot his name. There are three male teachers. The female teachers are *Tharamu* [female teacher] Mu Ble, *Tharamu* Eh Moo Dah, *Tharamu* Mee Mee, *Tharamu* Naw Kweh Ne and a nursery teacher. There are nine teachers.

Where do the students continue their studies after seventh standard?

⁶ All conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report are based on the July 25th 2014 official market rate of 974 kyat to the US \$1.

Some students go to the Salween River [continue their studies at the school located alongside the Salween River or in refugee camps in Thailand]. The students whose parents have money go to [a school in] Hpapun city.

Does the Burmese government support education?

Actually the Burmese government wants to support our education, but we do not allow them.

What about healthcare?

They want to support healthcare too.

Who does not allow them?

Our leaders [KNU] do not allow them and the villagers do not accept it either. I think their support would not be sufficient even if we allowed them. They [Burma government] will not do it properly, and only do it to make themselves look good.

What about the livelihoods of the villagers?

The current situation is not like the past. The villagers are working very hard but there are so many insects which destroy paddy.⁷ Rats also destroy our paddy.

How did the villagers work for their livelihoods in the past? Do the villagers have enough food?

Everyone does not have enough food. The villagers who are working on farms have more rice than the villagers who are working on hill fields. For example, I am working on a hill field and I always need [for consumption] 20 or 30 big tins (209 kg. or 460.8 lb., or 313.5 kg. or 691.2 lb. respectively)⁸ of paddy every year.

What about the other villages?

The other villages are not different from our village.

How do villagers handle the situation when they do not have enough paddy?

The villagers who do not have enough paddy borrow paddy from the villagers who have enough. Some villagers go and buy rice. They go to Hpapun and buy rice if there is no more available in the village.

Does the Burmese government support the villagers who do not have enough paddy?

They would like to come and support us, but we do not accept it because we think it is not enough.

What about Kyoh Hko Der village [do they accept it]?

⁷ Paddy is rice grain that is still in the husk.

⁸ A big tin is a unit of volume used to measure paddy, milled rice and seeds. One big tin is equivalent to 10.45 kg. or 23.04 lb. of paddy, and 16 kg. or 35.2 lb. of milled rice.

The Burmese government would like to support Kyoh Hko Der, He Hko Der, Chaw Weh Der and Hto Hker Der [villages]. I think they will not accept it even though they do not have enough food.

I heard that the Tatmadaw sent rice sacks to Kyoh Hko Der. Is that right?

The Tatmadaw will send rice sacks if the villagers accept it. It depends on the villagers. For example, our villagers did not accept it and they did not send them. I am not sure if they sent it or not [to Kyoh Hko Der].

I heard that the Tatmadaw also sent one hydro generator⁹ to Kyoh Hko Der village. Is that right?

I do not know.

Are villagers allowed to build their houses with wood?

Yes, we are allowed to build our houses with wood if we can afford it, but we are not allowed in the other areas [conflict zones].

Have you seen any activities of the Tatmadaw in 2013?

We have not seen any special activities in this area. For example, [we have not witnessed any] fighting.

What about forced labour?

Forced labour is decreasing too.

What do you think about the activity of the Tatmadaw in the future?

I do not know, but I dare not think of peace yet.

Why?

I do not know. Are the Tatmadaw cheating? I do not think there will be peace. We have been living like this for a long time. We never have peace.

How long have you been working as a village head?

I have been working as a village head for a long time. I am a villager and I am working as a village head because there is a need. I am working as a village head again and again because it is needed. I think I have been working for six, seven or more than seven years.

What is the difference between the past and the present?

Forced labour and work asked for by the enemy [Tatmadaw] are decreasing nowadays. We had to find people to guide them when they [Tatmadaw] came to the village in the past, mostly in the past two or three years. There were only one or two people in the village who know the way and we went to them and requested them to go, but they did not accept it [because they had already helped the Tatmadaw many times]. We asked them anyway, even though they did not accept it. The Tatmadaw also urged us and requested that we help them and to have pity on them, and they [also informed us that they] will pay the people. It was a problem for us to go and look at the people's [the people who know the way] faces. It is like forced labour. We do not want to go

⁹ A hydro generator is a small generator which uses the natural flow of water to generate electricity.

to the people's house again but the Tatmadaw asked us to go. It is compulsory. Then, the wife of the person argued with him when he went [to guide Tatmadaw soldiers]. This is a problem. We showed them [the Tatmadaw] the way in 2013, and it is not our concern anymore, because they know the way themselves. Also, one person died while guiding the Tatmadaw.

When?

It was one and half years ago.

Where is he or she from?

He is from He Poe Der village.

Female or male?

Male.

What is his name?

Po Wa Law.

Which camp was he supposed to guide the Tatmadaw to?

He was supposed to guide the Tatmadaw to Ka Hee Kyoh camp, but he stepped on a landmine before he reached the camp.

Where were the Tatmadaw from?

From Hpapun city.

Whose landmine did he step on?

He stepped on a KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] landmine. After that, the Tatmadaw carried him to their camp, and he died after they reached the camp. Then the Burmese took him back [to the village]. My brother went to the camp with them. They [the Tatmadaw] asked my brother what they should do and my brother told them to take him back to his home, which the Tatmadaw did.

Did he carry materials for the Tatmadaw or just guide them?

He just guided them.

Did the family of the person who died get support from the Tatmadaw?

I heard that they would give two rice sacks and 100,000 kyat (US \$102.67) to the family. I thought they might do it, but they gave less than the amount that they promised.

Thank you very much and do you have anything else to say that I did not ask you?

I always have a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Can you tell us more about that feeling?

If we look back to our family, we have suffered. We also have suffered regarding the enemy [Tatmadaw] and our livelihood as well.

What are your sufferings?

Regarding the enemy, we are worried whether there will be peace or fighting. In terms of our family, we worry that our children will be hungry. We have a child. We take him with us when we go to the field. Sometimes our child feels sick and then we face many difficulties. The things that we encounter are very miserable. I want to die but I cannot die [laughing]. There is always trouble.

Thank you very much.

Further background reading on the situation in Hpapun District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- “Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, February 2013,” (July 2014)
- “Coercive land appropriation and KNLA landmine incident surrounds construction of a BGF army base in Hpapun District,” (July 2014)
- “Hpapun Short Update: Ongoing militarisation and displacement in Lu Thaw Township, December 2013,” (July 2014)
- “Chapter: The impact of anti-personnel and other mines in Southeast Myanmar since the January 2012 ceasefire,” (July 2014)
- “Tatmadaw mortar shelling and other military activities in Hpapun and Toungoo districts, December 2013,” (July 2014)

Mu Traw (Hpapun) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)