



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

July 9, 2014 / KHRG #13-16-A2-I1

Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, February 2013

This Interview with Saw A--- describes events occurring in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District in 2012 and 2013. Continuing a trend from previous years, Border Guard Forces ordered four villages in Bu Tho Township to provide a total of 2,000 thatched shingles. Additionally, two villagers are forced to serve as sentries at the BGF army base at all times, in three day shifts. The interviewee also described how mine contamination remaining from the conflict period resulted in two mine incidents in 2012 in the area; both men needed to have one of their legs amputated. 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 A---, (male, 32), B--- village, Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District (February 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 February 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 eight other interviews, one short update, one situation update and 28 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Farming hill and flat fields

Position: Village head

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.

How many thatched shingles have they [Tatmadaw-Border Guard Forces (BGF)]³ ordered from you?

500 thatched shingles.

How much does it cost to sell 100 thatched shingles?

5,000 kyat (US \$5.07)⁴ for 100 thatched shingles.

What about 500 thatched shingles?

25,000 kyat (US \$25.33).

They ordered 500 thatched shingles from B--- [village], what about other villages?

500 thatched shingles from C---. 500 thatched shingles from D---. Altogether, 2,000 thatched shingles.

Did it include Mae La?

No. Mae La is in Htee Tha Daw Hta village tract.

Were there any [other] villages [from which] they ordered thatched shingles [or] only these three villages?

No, there were four villages. They were E---, C---, B--- and F---.

How many thatched shingles?

Each village had to give 500 thatched shingles, so there were 2,000 thatched shingles.

Who ordered [thatched shingles]?

Maung Nyo Thaing.

Is Maung Nyo Thaing [a member of the] KNU, DKBA [Democratic Karen Benevolent Army]⁵ or SPDC [Tatmadaw]?⁶

³ 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.

⁴ As of January 13th 2014, all conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report are based on the official market rate of 987 kyat to the US \$1.

⁵ 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.

He is [a member of the] BGF [Border Guard Force].

Do you know his Battalion? Is he from Battalion #1014 or #1013?

He is from Company #4, but I don't know which battalion. Maybe, it is Battalion #1014.

Where are they based?

They are based in Meh Pree Pa Doh.

In which village tract are the four villages that had to give thatched shingles located?

In Meh Pree village tract.

Meh Pree village tract is in which township?

Bu Tho Township.

Had [they] already ordered [thatched shingles] a long time [ago]?

No, just last month.

Do they still order them now [this year]?

We have to give them every year.

Is the case finished?

I cannot say. Last year, we have to give them a tax for hill fields and flat farms.

When did they order you [to provide] the 2,000 thatched shingles?

A few days ago already.

Now, do they still order [thatched shingles]?

Yes, I just went [to BGF #1014 army base] this morning.

What did they tell you this morning?

He just said that if "things" arrive, come and tell me. We cannot inform him, they are far from us.

What are "things"?

⁶ In Karen, the Burmese phrases *Na Ah Pa* (SPDC) and *Na Wa Ta* (SLORC) are commonly used to refer to the Burma 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.

Maw Ko [black market cow and buffalo traders].

What about thatched shingles?

They ordered them. They also ordered other things. For the thatched shingles, they order them every year.

In this year, 2,000 right?

Yes.

Did they buy them [the thatched shingles]?

No, they [just] took them, like that.

Do you know Maung Nyo Thaing commander's name?

Bo [Officer] Maung Gyi. He is the company commander. Maung Nyo Thaing is under *Bo* Maung Gyi's control.

Is Maung Nyo Thaing an officer or teacher?

He is an officer.

Is there any other forced labour?

No, we only have to provide the thatched shingles.

Do the villagers have to [serve as] sentries?

No.

What about Meh Pree villagers?

Yes, they have to serve as sentries and each person has to [work] for three days.

Meh Pree villagers always have to do that?

Yes, two people have to serve at a time.

Until now?

Yes.

Can you give me the name of Meh Pree villagers who have to be sentries?

I cannot say because they always change every three days.

Do you know anyone and who they are?

Yes, Saw G---.

Any others?

There were two people this morning, but I cannot remember the other's name. We ate betel nut⁷ together but I cannot remember his name.

When Meh Pree villagers stay in the camp, what do they have to do?

They have to cook and carry water, bullets and pots.

Do they [BGF soldiers] travel?

They always go to sleep in villages. If they fight at night we will all die.

They do not sleep in Meh Pree camp, so when they go to sleep in the village, do people have to carry things for them?

Yes, because they [BGF] got strong orders from their leaders that they must not fight with the black scarves [KNLA].⁸ They stay in [their camp during the] daytime but they leave at night time.

Did they tell you that they must not fight the KNLA?

Yes, if they fight, their rations will be cut off.

They cannot fight and also cannot stay [in the village]; who told you about that?

Bo Nyo Thaing told me. He also told me they cannot go to villages with guns because the KNLA doesn't allow them.

They order thatched shingles only from the four villages? What about other villages?

Only the four villages and they order them every year. In the past, in Hkaw Taw Poo [Myaing Gyi Ngu], sometimes, they ordered one million thatched shingles for one year. Each household had to make 50 to 100 thatched shingles, so I was tired.

What about in this year? How did you divide [the work]?

Large households have to provide more and small households have to pay less. At least 200 or 300 [thatched shingles] for each household.

Do the BGF, DKBA and KNU use landmines to protect themselves?

In the past, people stepped on landmines on the Htee Htaw Hkee path, but they [villagers] do not dare to take [them] out.

Can you estimate how many landmines are left?

I don't know, but they exploded one or two times and hit two villagers. How many are left, I don't know.

⁷ In Burmese, 'betel nut' 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.

⁸ '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.

Where were the two villagers from?

They were from Meh Pree Hkee.

Where were they sent [for medical care]?

They were sent to Taung K'Lay Hospital.

Did they get prosthetic?

Yes.

Do you know their names?

[One of them,] his house is near here. His name is Saw H---

How old is he?

Over 50 years.

Do you know his father's name?

I don't know his father's name, but he stays in Meh Pree Pa Doh [village]. I know he is called Saw I---

Saw H---'s father is called Saw I---?

Yes, but it is not his real name. He is called Saw I--- because he is from I---

How old is Saw H---?

Over 50 years; about 56 years old.

What about the other one who stepped on the landmine?

His name is Saw J---. His real name is Saw K---

How old is his he?

He is over 40 years old; nearly 50 years old.

Do you know his father's name?

I nearly remember it, but I'm not [able to].

How long ago did they step on the landmines?

Within the last year.

How many months [ago]?

Already 12 months.

In 2012?

Yes.

Whose landmines?

BGF.

Did they tell villagers where they planted the landmine?

No, they didn't say.

So how do the villagers know?

They know because they stepped on it. One was while he went to cut bamboo and another one was when he was drunk. People told him not to go to that way, but he went. *Bo* Lwah came and cooked there and they have *ler chaw* [three stones that serve as stove for cooking]. He walked on the *Ler Chaw* way so he stepped on a landmine.

Have they already come back from Taung K'Lay Hospital?

Yes, now, they went to Mae La Moo.

Do you still have anything to say to us?

There are many problems but I don't [know] what to say. If you help the black scarves [KNLA], they [BGF] say we love the black scarves. So, we have to work for them [BGF] too. We have to show that we love them the same because we are all Karen.

So, you have to be friends with them, every group [local state and ethnic armed actors]?

I drink wine a lot, so I talk to them.

Can we use your information to report to others?

Yes.

What is your name?

My name is Saw A---.

How old are you?

32 years old.

Are you single or married?

I'm married.

How many children do you have?

Two boys and one girl.

How old is your oldest child?

19 years old.

What about the youngest one?

Over 10 years old.

Which ethnicity are you?

I'm an E--- villager.

I mean which ethnicity, such as Karen, Thai or Burmese?

I'm Karen.

What is your religion?

Buddhism.

What do you do for work?

I do flat farms and hill fields.

Do you have any other responsibilities?

No, I only climb to collect betel nut leaves [to sell].

You are a village head, right?

Yes, but I can still climb for betel nut leaves. If I don't do that, then I don't have money.

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

- "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)
- "Hpapun District Situation Update: Dwe Lo Township, January to February 2013," (July 2014)
- "Hatgyi Dam update and consultation concerns, December 2011 to May 2013," (July 2014)

Mu Traw (Hpapun) District



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