



# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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## News Bulletin

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### Hpapun Interview: Saw B---, February 2013

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*This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted during 2013 in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The community member interviewed Saw B---, who described how villagers in Meh Pree and Kyaw Hpah village tracts were required to construct the Htee Lah Beh Hta Bridge over the Bilin River. Saw B--- explained that the labour was requested by prominent Monk U Thuzana, and that the villagers choose to perform the labour to accrue Buddhist merit. In a separate KHRG report on the same incident, a different villager explains that it is not possible to refuse the labour: [“Demands for labour and money by religious leaders in Hpapun District,”](#) January 2013.*

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#### **Interview | Saw B--- (male), C--- village, Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District (February 2013)**

*The following interview conducted by a community member in Hpapun District is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.<sup>1</sup> This interview was received along with other information from Hpapun District, including eight other interviews, one situation update and 28 photographs.<sup>2</sup>* **I would like to [know some things] about building the bridge. Where and when [are they building it]?**

The Htee Lah Eh Hta [bridge]? What is the name of the pagoda? I can't remember.

**Will they build the bridge in Htee Lah Eh Hta? When did they begin building the bridge? How many days [ago]?**

[They started] around one month [ago].

**Is it almost finished?**

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<sup>1</sup> KHRG trains villagers 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, villagers 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

Yes, but they haven't begun [to construct the bridge on] the other side of the river yet. And they first started on the east side.

**Where and in which village tract is the bridge located?**

In Htee Tha Daw Hta [village tract].

**Near which village?**

Near Noh Hta village, called Htee Lah Eh Hta.

**How about the other side? Where does that road lead [to]?**

It leads to the main road.

**Which road?**

The Hpapun main road.

**K'Ma Moh to Hpapun main road?**

Yes, correct.

**Can you guess how long it [the bridge] is?**

To the other side of the river.

**That is [how far]?**

Um, how could I know? It is hard to guess.

**One furlong?<sup>3</sup>**

Yes, one furlong, he [another villager] said.

**Who built it?**

Who built it? The monk.

**Which monk?**

*Hpuh Hkaw Taw*, [Karen name for] U Thuzana.<sup>4</sup>

**What is his goal for building that bridge?**

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<sup>3</sup> A furlong is a unit of distance equivalent to 0.125 of a mile or 0.2 of a km.

<sup>4</sup> U Thuzana is an influential Buddhist monk based in Myaing Gyi Ngu who was instrumental in the formation of the DKBA in 1994; see "Inside the DKBA," KHRG, March 1996. In 1995, KHRG reported that U Thuzana had collaborated with the Tatmadaw, and met with then-Southeastern Commander Major General Maung Hla to obtain weapons and supplies for 4,000 soldiers in his monastery. As a result of the agreement, U Thuzana's monastery in Myaing Gyi Ngu, in northern Hpa-anHpa-an District, reportedly developed a reputation as a mystical safe haven for villagers avoiding Tatmadaw abuses. See "Karen Human Rights Group commentary," KHRG, February 1995.

If the bridge is built we hope that he [the monk] will [oversee] the development and livelihood of the people in the country, that [our village] will be connected to Meh Pree, Meh Hta [villages] and so on. He hopes that people will be able to travel smoothly.

**The monk has a lot of money and builds bridges. Does he do any business?**

We don't know if he does any business or not. Donations? I don't know where the money is from.

**Do you know, if he does not do business, who helps him [building the bridge]?**

I don't know. I guess he maybe has a contract with companies or rich [business] people who wish to help him.

**Do you know any of them?**

I don't know. I just guess. Many people would think that.

**When they worked [constructed the bridge], did the monks themselves help?**

The villagers [alone] built it.

**How many villages were asked to help building the bridge?**

All villages from A--- to D---, including from the Meh Pree village tract and Kyaw Hpah.

**From A--- to D---, all [the villagers] were asked? The village tracts are A---, W---, T---, S---, G---. So five village tracts altogether? How many villagers have to work?**

I don't know. It depends on how big the village is.

**How about your village?**

Ten people [villagers] for five days. Ten people rotated every five days. And [after] another five days, another ten people.

**Until when?**

Until it's finished; until the bridge will be finished.

**Can you guess how long it will take to finish the bridge?**

They set a six-month limit for finishing it.

**So, ten people [villagers] go every five days [for] six months? Oh, [that is] many people. That should be thousands of villagers that are cooperating?**

Yes, more than a thousand.

**Let's see how far it is from your village to the Htee Lah Eh Hta [bridge]. How many furlongs [is] that? [Are you] going by engine boat or by car?**

By boat.

**Is there any problem for you whenever you go there? I mean, if you go by boat?**

They said that we have to be volunteers, as in free labour. The problem is, that we have to volunteer and we have to use our own expenses. We have to pay the boat rate by ourselves [since] the boat driver cannot take us there for free every five days. We should help too.

**Doesn't the monk make a plan to arrange [the payment] for the boat?**

No, not yet.

**It hasn't been arranged yet? And [the monk] doesn't pay for that?**

No.

**Is there any payment for the ten people that work in rotation every five days?**

No.

**What did the monk say about that?**

He didn't say [call it] labour, but he said [the work is] for merit.

**Like labour merit in religion [Buddhism]. Now the monks are there on the bridge speaking [reciting the Buddhist script].**

They are the monks who recite the Buddhist script, but the one [the head of the monks] who leads them [is not among them on the bridge].

**Do you think everybody wants to do the labour [for] merit?**

In reality, whether they can or cannot, many people do not wish to do it. But the religious leaders in the village decided that we should follow [work on the bridge]. People go and we should also go.

**Have you heard anything from your village about [villagers] facing a problem working on it [the bridge]?**

They felt that even if they are busy, they have to do that [work on the bridge], because it is for merit, and that's why they do not have any problem [working on the bridge].

**What if they are absent from it [work]? If they're busy or if they can't go, is there any punishment for that?**

If they are in that situation, we do not force them to go. There is no punishment for them. Because it is for merit, we do not force them to work if they can't.

**Let's say the order is that ten people should go every five days. If they don't go, will they be punished?**

If they are busy or ill it is fine for them to be absent. We understand them.

**Among the workers, how many kind of workers [different professions] are there? Do people from away [a different village] work there; people from near that area and people who are hired by the monks?**

He [the monk] communicates to the village leaders by writing letters, and they decide how many people should go there [based] on how big the village is.

**Did you see that the letters were really sent to the village head?**

Yes, I did.

**Is there any sign [marking on the letter] by the monk?**

Yes, a *dharmma wheel* [a circular symbol with Buddhist teachings on it].

**Some villagers are busy and are not able to do that [work for the monk]. They may be busy because they have their own work to do, isn't it? Are they forced to work?**

Yes, as you say, some people are not free, but they feel like they have to go when other people go. And 'times were over like that'.<sup>5</sup>

**While working for them, do they [the monks] arrange anything like meals or food for them [the villagers]?**

For food, a lot of vegetables come from the lower parts [of the village]. Mustard, marrow, watermelon, cucumbers, so many...

**Are villagers able to eat enough food?**

Yes, they are able to eat enough.

**What happens when [the villagers are] feeling ill? Do they [the monks] take care of them? Do they give them medicines?**

Yes they do. They help with that.

**Are there DKBA [Democratic Karen Benevolent Army]<sup>6</sup> soldiers [who are] assisting him [Monk U Thuzana]?**

No.

**Are there any armed soldiers around while building the bridge?**

No. There are only the leaders, who are responsible for managing that [the construction of the bridge]. There are many people that lead [each part of the construction process], depending on their responsibility.

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<sup>5</sup> This is the direct translation of a Karen-language idiom and roughly means "such is life".

<sup>6</sup> 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.

**Where are the leaders from?**

They are from Taw Hkoh Law Kyoh.

**Which section?**

From the big city.

**What is the name of the city?**

Myaing Gyi Ngu.

**The Taw Hkoh Law Kyoh section should have its own name [in Burmese]?**

I can't remember.

**There are many other names like Nhin His Myaing, Sonnantha Myaing P'Tauk Myaing.**

I am not sure whether it is called P'Tauk Myaing or not.

**Ok, I will mention each of the names to you. They are Nhin Hsi Myaing, Zi Z'wa Myaing, In Gyin Myaing and P'Tauk Myaing.**

Is it P'Tauk Myaing or In Gyin Myaing? Maybe it should be P'Tauk Myiaing.

**People from P'Tauk Myaing managed that?**

Yes.

**Are there any other things that you want to mention regarding the building of the bridge? Like any sort of problems that you have whether it is good or bad [or other questions] that I haven't asked you?**

I can't say it is bad, because leaders have organised us to work on it and we followed that [their leadership]. Let's say that the next generation will be able to see [it] and cross over it easily in future. Yes, that is all.

**Is that all?**

Yes, it is.

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

- ["Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, August to October 2013,"](#) (February 2014)
- ["Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, March to May 2013,"](#) (December 2013)
- ["Rape and sexual harassment in Hpapun District, June and August 2013,"](#) (November 2013)
- ["Hpapun Incident Report: Tatmadaw soldiers threaten brickmaker in Bu Tho Township,"](#) (November 2013)

- [Civilian and Military order documents: November 2009 to July 2013,](#)  
(October 2013)

