



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

August 18, 2014 / KHRG #13-69-A1-I1

Hpapun Interview: U A---, July 2013

This Interview with U A--- describes land confiscation occurring in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District, during the period between October 1992 and July 2013.

- *In 1992, Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #340 Commander Maung Maung Soe confiscated U A--- and his other brothers' land in order to build the LIB #340 monastery. This has made it difficult for him and his siblings to earn their livelihoods.*
 - *In 2013, President Thein Sein announced that the Burma/Myanmar government would either return land confiscated by the Tatmadaw, or provide compensation for the land at its current market value. However, U A---'s land has not yet been returned to him, nor has he received any compensation.*
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Interview | U A---, (male, 46), B--- village, Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District (July 2013)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. It was conducted in Hpapun District on July 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 11 other interviews, five incident reports, one situation update and 38 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Muslim³

Religion: Islam

Marital Status:

Occupation: Farmer

Position: [Censored for security]

What is your name?

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.

³ The interviewee self-identified his ethnicity as Muslim, as is common in Burma, but later explained that his mother is Karenni (see footnote #5 for further information).

I am U A---.

How old are you?

I am 46 years old.

What do you do?

I do farming.

Are you in any position [of responsibility] in this village? For example village head, etc.

I used to serve, since 1991, but I quit from *[position censored for security]* last December [2012].

So, you served since 1991 and you just quit last month?

Yes, it was 20 years.

I think you have been living in this village since you were young.

Yes.

Have you ever lived in any other village?

I have never lived in any other village.

What do you do?

I do farming and cultivation.

What is the name of the village tract [where you live]?

Meh Klaw Aauk Kiang.

In which township is Meh Klaw Aauk Kiang village tract located?

In Hpapun Township.⁴

In which area of the village tract is B--- village located?

Meh Klaw Hta [the eastern part of the village tract].

In which township?

In Bu Tho Township.

⁴ While U A--- said Hpapun Township, it was an error and he meant to say Bu Tho Township. Hpapun is a District in which Bu Tho Township is located. Noticing the mistake, the KHRG researcher repeats the question shortly after in order to obtain the correct answer.

In what religion do you believe?

Islam. I am Kayah [Karenni].⁵ My father is a Muslim and my mom is a Kayah.

So you are Muslim?

Yes.

Ok, you are Muslim.

Yes.

How many houses are there in this village?

There are about 70 houses.

What I would like to know is in the past ten years...[interviewer changes question]...are you staying on your land currently?

Yes, I bought land from others and I am staying on it.

When did you buy the land?

In 1994.

In 1994?

Yes.

Ok. So, before 1994, did you ever have your own land?

Yes, I had my own land.

Why did you buy this land [that you occupy now]?

After they [Tatmadaw] confiscated my land, I did not have any land to stay on. I bought the land [that I currently own] and I settled on it.

How much did you pay for that [land that was confiscated]?

At that time, I paid 3,000.

In Burmese currency?

Yes, 3,000 kyat (US \$3.08).⁶

⁵ The Karenni (or Kayah) people are the descendants of the people of a semi-independent kingdom that existed until World War II in what is now Burma/Myanmar's Kayah State. The Karenni are one of the eight 'main national races' officially recognised by the Burma/Myanmar government. For the Burma/Myanmar government, the term is primarily geographic in nature, and the majority of government-identified Karenni people live in the Burma/Myanmar government demarcated area of Kayah State, located in the southeast of Burma/Myanmar and bordering Kayin State, Shan State, and Thailand.

Among the words that you said, it included the word ‘confiscate’. So, who confiscated the land [that you used to own]?

The military.

Which military?

[Tatmadaw] #340’s Battalion Commander Maung Maung Soe.

#340 is LIB [Light Infantry Battalion]⁷ or IB [Infantry Battalion]⁸?

It is LIB.

Commander name?

Battalion Commander Maung Maung Soe.

Lieutenant Colonel⁹ Maung Maung Soe?

Yes.

Why did they confiscate [your land]?

Win Taung village, [where LIB #340 was based], was destroyed and they did not have a place to build a monastery and so they confiscated my land.

So, they confiscated the land for the military?

Yes, they confiscated it as land for the military.

Brother U A---, do you remember the date that they confiscated the land?

Yes, I do.

Can you tell me [the date]?

They confiscated it in October 1992.

They confiscated it as military land and what did they use the land for?

They confiscated it as military land and they built a monastery on it.

⁶ All conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report are based on the July 29, 2014 official market rate of 973 kyat to the US \$1.

⁷ 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.

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⁹ In the Tatmadaw, Lieutenant Colonels are regularly referred to as Battalion Commanders. While U A--- refers to Maung Maung Soe as Battalion Commander, the KHRG researcher chooses to refer to Maung Maung Soe’s rank as Lieutenant Colonel. Both titles are correct.

Now, is the monastery there?

Yes.

What did they name the monastery?

The [LIB] #340 monastery.

In the beginning of the year [2013], President Thein Sein announced that he would return land that had been confiscated by the military. [However, he will not return] land that is suitable for use by the military, but he will compensate [the former land owners for] the same amount as the current value [of the land]. Have they returned your land to you since they have announced this?

They have not returned anything yet.

Nothing?

They said they will provide [compensation for the land] instead, but they have not paid yet.

Did you hear that?

Yes, they said they will give [compensation for the land] instead and that they will not give [the land back], but they have not given any money as compensation [yet].

As for the value of your land that was confiscated, how many hundreds of thousands [of kyat] should it be with the current [land] price?

All together it was 30 acres of land.

So, now, how much is it for one acre of land with the current market price?

The current land price is about 400,000 for one acre.

400,000 means [kyat or baht]?

[Actually], one acre is worth 1,200,000 kyat (US \$1,233.30).

1,200,000 [kyat] for one acre?

Yes.

In Burmese currency?

Yes.

How many acres [of your land were confiscated]?

30 acres.

Is that only your land?

It is me and my brothers' land. It is the heritage [land] from our parents.

Ok.

It was inherited from my parents.

Don't you want to try to get this land back?

Of course I want to.

In what ways do you want to try [to get your land back]?

It would be good if they [military] compensated us [for the land]. Otherwise, I'll suffer.

What I would like to know is that...[interviewer changes question]... U Thein Sein announced [they would return or compensate people for confiscated land], [but] now [he] has not implemented anything. You heard U Thein Sein's announcement right?

Yes, I heard it.

Have you got your [land back] as U Thein Sein announced?

No, not yet.

So, you have been questioned a lot by me and could you tell me about your suffering as a result of your land and farms being confiscated by the military?

To be honest, [I] feel hurt.

Yes, feel hurt only? How about other [feelings]?

The people, [my] brothers and siblings, do not have [land] to work on.

Has it caused problems?

Yes, it has become difficult [to earn a livelihood].

As for us, what should we do for you? What do you want us to do for you?

How?

How should we help you?

Report it to the superiors [Burma government].

Ok, I see. So, I was asking you questions and you answered my questions. So, if I use this [information] and send it to other information departments [media, NGOs, etc.], will you allow me to use [the information]?

Yes, I will allow.

Thanks.

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

- “Hpapun Incident Report: Destruction of paddy nursery field in Dwe Lo Township, November 2012,” (July 2014)
- “Tatmadaw mortar shelling and other military activities in Hpapun and Toungoo Districts, December 2013,” (July 2014)
- Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, February 2013,” (July 2014)
- “Hpapun Short Update: Ongoing militarisation and displacement in Lu Thaw Township, December 2013,” (July 2014)
- “Coercive land appropriation and KNLA landmine incident surrounds construction of a BGF army base in Hpapun District,” (July 2014)

Northeastern Kayin State



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