



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Short Update

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Mergui-Tavoy Short Update: Ler Muh Lah Township, 1998 to 2013

This Short Update describes events occurring in Ler Muh Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District between 1998 and 2013, including forced relocation, torture, arbitrary arrest, and forced labour.

- *In 1998, villagers now living in A--- village were forced to relocate by the Tatmadaw.*
 - *In June 2011, the village head of A--- village was severely beaten by Tatmadaw soldiers as he was interrogated for information on suspected village connections to the Karen National Union (KNU). Based on information he eventually gave the Tatmadaw soldiers under torture, at least 15 villagers were arrested and held in jail.*
 - *During the conflict, Tatmadaw soldiers led by Officer Nay Lin Soe arrested all the male villagers in A--- village and killed the village head. They forced all the male villagers to be sentries throughout the night, beating them if they fell asleep. This caused the rest of the villagers to flee to the forest for several weeks.*
 - *After being forced to relocate by the Tatmadaw, the villagers have struggled with housing on their new land; since 2009, the owner of the new land has not permitted the villagers to build any new houses. The villagers have asked the Tatmadaw for support with this, as it was them who relocated the villagers to this land, but they have not received any help.*
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Short Update | Ler Muh Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District (1998 to 2013)

The following Short Update was received by KHRG in September 2013. It was written by a community member in Mergui-Tavoy District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It is presented below translated exactly as originally written, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹ This report was received along with other information from Mergui-Tavoy District, including 25 incident reports, 308 photographs, and 13 video clips.²

Village head tortured

In June 2011, 22-year-old Saw B---, who lives in A--- village, Ka Pyaw village tract, Ler Muh Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District, suffered [at the hands of] [Tatmadaw Light Infantry] Battalion

¹ KHRG trains community members in southeast Burma/Myanmar 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 writing situation updates, community members are encouraged to summarise recent events, raise issues that they consider to be important, and present their opinions or perspective on abuse and other local dynamics in their area.

² In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in southeast Burma/Myanmar, 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.

(LIB)³ #401 Commander Nay Phyo Win, when the battalion was based in Ma The Bweh [village]. Saw B--- is a hill farmer and he is an A--- village youth group member. The incident happened after the Karen National Union (KNU) entered the village to collect tax from the villagers. Saw B--- suffered as a result of this and has also been arrested and held in a cell by the Tatmadaw.

[In Saw B---'s words:] *"I do not remember the day [of the incident]. It was in June 2011 in A--- village. The incident happened like this: the KNU came and collected tax from the villagers. At that time, they [the KNU] asked for the leader [village head] and asked for help in bringing food to them [the KNU]. As we love our people [the KNU], we brought food to them. [At the same time as] they came to demand money [and ask for food], we told the [KNU] officer about how we are suffering in the village.*

The incident [that caused the suffering] happened in the village like this: [In 1998] when we were asked to relocate [due to the conflict], it [the relocation] was arranged by the Tatmadaw. The Tatmadaw relocated us to A--- village. [In 2011], after the Tatmadaw [had] gone back [left the area], the owner of the land [in A--- village] [Kyi Lwin] did not let all of us build houses. We asked the [local] leader [officer] of the KNU to tell [Kyi Lwin] to give us permission to build our houses. When he [the KNU officer] went and explained [to Kyi Lwin] about the issue he [Kyi Lwin] became angry, so he [the KNU officer] harmed [beat] him a little.

After that, Kyi Lwin went to the Tatmadaw [Light Infantry] Battalion #401 [camp] and said [reported to the Tatmadaw] that the KNU came and harmed him. The [Tatmadaw] officer then came [to A--- village] and arrested the leader [village head] and asked whether or not he had a connection to the KNU. He [the Tatmadaw officer] harmed him [the village head] and beat him. Although he [the Tatmadaw officer] interrogated the leader [village head], the leader [village head] did not tell them [anything]. [However] as he was beaten [to such an extent that] he could not stand it [anymore], he said:

"It is not because we [made] contact with them. It is because they ordered [us to go to them] and we had to go."

He was beaten [further] and asked [by the Tatmadaw officer]:

"Who else went with you and what did you bring for them?" The leader [village head] replied:

"I brought food for them." He was beaten again and as he could not stand it, he finally told him [the Tatmadaw officer] the names [of the people who went with him to take food to the KNU]. He was asked:

"How many people went with you and what are their names?" As he could not stand it [the beating], he told [them] the names. They [the names of the villagers that were given to the Tatmadaw officer by the village head] are: 1) Saw C---, 2) Saw D---, 3) Saw E---, 4) Saw F---, 5) Saw G---, 6) Saw H---, 7) Saw I---, 8) Saw J---, 9) Saw K---, 10) Saw L---, 11) Saw B---, 12) Saw N---, 13) Saw O---. He [the Tatmadaw officer] came to question us [the villagers] and [subsequently] arrested us [villagers named by the village head and others] and kept us in a cell.

The leaders of P--- village came to appeal [to the Tatmadaw officer] for us and guaranteed [we would all be released]. [Only] half of us were released. As for Saw Q--- and Saw R---, they were

³ Light Infantry Battalion (Tatmadaw) comprises 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.

kept in jail. [However] as the country has more freedom now [after the 2012 ceasefire],⁴ they have been released.”

Villagers’ livelihoods

Since wealthy people entered [the village], the occupations of the villagers are not going well. As we have a chance to object to it [the development project], we are going to object to it as ordered.⁵

Arbitrary arrest

[During the conflict period], the village head and all of the male villagers were arrested by [Tatmadaw] officer Nay Lin Soe in A--- village, Ka Pyaw village tract, Ler Muh Lah Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. The village head was killed and all of the male villagers were taken [to the Tatmadaw military camp]. The rest of the villagers dared not stay in the village and they had to flee [and hide] in the forest. They had to flee [and hide] for one to two months. At that time, Saw S--- was in A--- village and he was very young. Now, he is 25 years old and he is working on a hill farm.

[In Saw S---’s words:] *“I cannot remember the time of the incident, but it was in A--- village. After [Tatmadaw] Officer Nay Lin Soe relocated us [villagers] to another place, there was fighting [between the Tatmadaw and the KNU]. After the fighting occurred, he [Tatmadaw Officer Nay Lin Soe] came and arrested all of the males [in the village] and they were asked to be sentries for the whole night. No one had a chance to sleep. What is more, he also asked them [the male villagers] to go and look for those who came and attacked him. Since we were afraid of him [Officer Nay Lin Soe], we had to go. Even though we saw the people who attacked him, we did not tell him. He did not release the people [male villagers] [and let them] go back and work [for themselves]. He let us go back [home] at 6:00 am but they [the Tatmadaw] asked us all to come back at 5:00 pm. When the people [male villagers] came back in the evening, they had to take responsibility for security of the military camp for the whole night. They [the Tatmadaw soldiers] came and secretly checked on the [male] villagers. If the people were tired and fell asleep, they [would] beat them or they would ask for money from the person instead.*

Saw T--- [one of the male villagers] *had suffered from that [punishment] when he had fallen asleep and the Tatmadaw soldiers saw him. The Tatmadaw called him [to them] and asked him to find the people [who attacked them]. [They told him that] if he could not find [the people], he would be beaten and punished; if he could find [the people who attacked them], he would be released.”*

Challenges with housing

[In Saw S---’s words:] *“At present [2013], the villagers face challenges with their land and their houses. After Officer Nay Lin Soe relocated them [in 1998], he did not support them. The owner of the land [that the villagers were relocated to] does not want the villagers to build more houses. They are faced with difficulties now, which began in 2009. For some villagers, if they do not have houses, they have to live with their parents. Although we went to the Tatmadaw’s office, we did not get [any support]. The villagers face problems concerning their houses.”*

Conclusion

⁴ This refers to the preliminary ceasefire agreement signed on January 12th 2012 between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. However, on October 15th 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups and on-going conflicts in ethnic regions, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between the Burma/Myanmar government and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited to the negotiation table, including the KNU, see [Myanmar signs ceasefire with eight armed groups](#), Reuters, October 15th 2015. For KHRG’s analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the preliminary ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014.

⁵ It is most likely that the order to object to the development project came from the village head.

At that time, we did not dare to try and protect ourselves and say that we are people [who support] the KNU [Karen National Union] as we did not know the rules. [For this reason], the church curator, Saw S---, was put into custody. When he was released, he said:

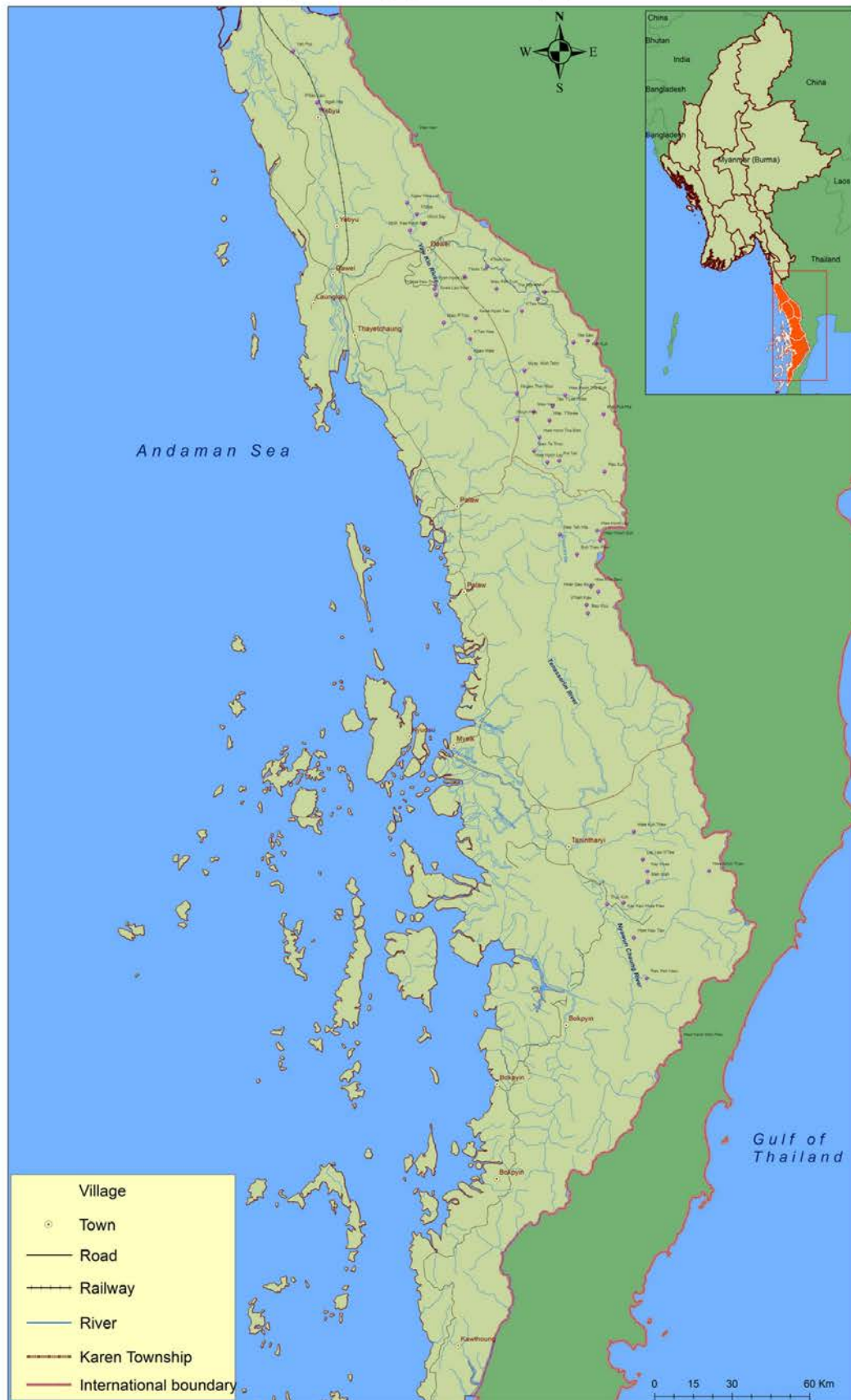
“We wanted to be seen as those who [support the] KNU but we could not. We will support them by praying [for them].”

Saw S--- [has suffered] and seen it [the situation of the villagers] and he does not feel good for them [the villagers]. He wants the KNU to know about how the villagers have suffered. He believes that the leaders of the KNU will arrange a way [to solve the problem of housing] for the villagers. From 2011/2012, the situation has become better.

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

- “Mergui-Tavoy Situation Update: Ler Muh Lah and Ta Naw Th’Ree townships, January to June 2015,” (October 2015)
- Press release on *“With only our voices, what can we do?”: Land confiscation and local response in southeast Myanmar*, (August 2015)
- *“With only our voices, what can we do?”: Land confiscation and local response in southeast Myanmar*, (June 2015)
- Press Release: *“With only our voices, what can we do?”: Land confiscation and local response in southeast Myanmar*, (June 2015)
- “Mergui-Tavoy photo set: The impact of development in Mergui-Tavoy District, May 2014,” (February 2015)

Mergui/Tavoy (Thanintharyi) District



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