



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

April 30, 2015 / KHRG #14-14-A2-11

Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, January 2014

This Interview with Saw A--- describes events in Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District, including the death of a home guard due to a landmine villagers believe was planted by the Tatmadaw. Saw A--- fled his village in 1997 due to Tatmadaw presence in the area and has been displaced ever since. Saw A--- also discusses his views on the current preliminary ceasefire between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burma/Myanmar government, as well as providing an update on healthcare and education in his current village.

Interview | Saw A---, (male, 37), C--- village, Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District (January 2014)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Hpapun District in January 2014 and is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.¹ This interview was received in January 2014 along with other information from Hpapun District, including seven other interviews, six incident reports, one situation update, three videos clips and 86 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Animist

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Farming a hill field

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.

Position: Village head [of B--- village and vice village head of C--- village]

What do people call this place [the interview location]?

Ler Day Hta [place].

What is your name?

Saw A---.

How old are you?

37 years old.

What is the name of your [original] village?

B--- village.

What is the village tract?

Meh Plaw village tract

What is the township?

Lu Thaw.

What is the district?

Mu Traw [Hpapun].

What is your ethnic group?

Karen.

What about your religion?

Animist.

What is your occupation?

Working on the hill fields.

Do you work on anything that is related to the KNU [Karen National Union]?

[I am also] working as the vice village head [of C--- village].³

Have you gotten married?

Yes, I have.

How many children do you have?

All together I have four children.

How old is the eldest one?

Nine years old.

What about the youngest one?

Three months.

How many houses were there in B--- village?

[There were] *[censored for security]*.

What is the number of people [population]?

[There are] 189 people.

How many years have you been working as a village head?

Five years.

As a village head, what are your responsibilities?

I have to control and manage the villagers in the village and work together [with them] for the future.

³ Village heads must often interact with the different groups operating in the area, in this instance as a go between for the villagers, KNU and Tatmadaw.

Do you yourself want to be a village head? Did the KNU ask you or did the villagers want you to be one and ask you?

It is not that I want to be [the village head], it is that the KNU and the villagers wanted and asked me to be [the village head].

Since starting as a village leader and until now, could you tell us a little bit about your experience and the challenges that you have faced related to your work? Is there anything?

There are various kinds of challenges that I have to face related to the work. Sometimes, asking the people [villagers] to work [do labour for armed actors] is one of the challenges. But if we look, the pressure from the Tatmadaw is the biggest challenge.

Regarding what you said about the pressure from the Tatmadaw, are you living in your village now?

Now, I do not have a chance to live in the village. We had to displace [ourselves] away from our village a little bit.

Which year did you flee from your village?

I fled in 1997.

In 1997. What is the date [that you left]?

On the 8th of May.

[From May 8th 1997] until now?

Yes, until now.

You have not had a chance to go back and live in your village?

Yes, [I have not had a chance to go back].

Since 1997 until now [2014], how many [different] places have you been displaced to?

I have been displaced to two or three [different] places. We moved from place to place until we arrived at D--- [village].

How many years have you stayed in one place?

Sometimes one year and sometimes two or three years.

Did the Tatmadaw burn down your former village B---?

The Tatmadaw did not burn it down, but it is near their camp location. They built their army camp and we do not dare to go back and live there.

Where is it [B---] located?

It is located near Htaw Muh Pleh Meh [area].

How far is Htaw Muh Pleh Meh [area] from your [former] village [B---]?

About half an hour [on foot].

Where do you stay [live] now?

[After D--- village, we moved to] C--- village.

Do all [censored for security] [from B--- village] live together [now] or do you live far from one another?

They [we] are not located together. They [we] spread [out] and are located among other villages one by one.

Do you know [about] the activity of the Tatmadaw in Htaw Muh Pleh Meh [area]?

I think their activity is that although they said they are going to make the ceasefire,⁴ they still build their army camps to be better. Therefore we, the villagers, have no satisfaction any more.

Do you dare to meet with [see] the Tatmadaw?

I am now thinking [that I] do not want to see the Tatmadaw at all.

⁴ On January 12th 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Negotiations for a longer-term peace plan are still under way. For updates on the peace process, see the KNU Stakeholder webpage on the Myanmar Peace Monitor website. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014.

In what way do you not want to see them? Why?

Because [the Tatmadaw] committing violence is one of the scary things. As we are the villager and we are working on the farms or hill fields and they [Tatmadaw] are committing the violence, we do not dare to meet with them.

Now you said the Tatmadaw are doing the ceasefire and if you meet with them, do you think they will still treat you the same as before? Will they kill people and commit violence like in the past?

I think even though they do not do these things [now], we do not dare meet with them.

What about the KNU? Do they cause you any trouble?

The KNU soldiers do not give us any trouble, but sometimes to protect villagers [they plant] landmines. [This] is one of the frightening things.

Is there anything like them [KNU] making any trouble for the civilians?

No, but sometimes requested labour is a concern for them [civilians]. [It] makes trouble for the civilians.

[Labour requested by the KNU], that is like doing it for our own [Karen] people? Like we have to work together [and help each other]?

Yes, we have to work together.

They [KNU] will do [request labour] like the Tatmadaw?

[No], they do not do like that.

It [the KNU] is our own people?

Yes, our own people.

Is there anyone who has to take the responsibility for the security and work together with the soldiers who are called home guards⁵ in your village?

⁵ 'Home guard' or *gher der* groups have been organised locally in parts of northern Kayin State to address Tatmadaw operations targeting civilians and the resulting acute food insecurity. Villagers interviewed by KHRG have reported that *gher der* were established with the objective of providing security for communities of civilians in hiding, particularly when those communities engage in food production or

There are only some home guards and body guards who work together with the KNU. The KNU also has weak points on the way [in their villager protection strategy]. [Although] there is no security [for home guards while serving their community] on the way, the home guards are very enthusiastic to take up [weapons] with them. So they organise themselves and they work together.

How many home guards do you have in your village?

There are five home guards in our village, but in the past two days, one was injured and died and [now] only four home guards are left.⁶

So how did the incident happen?

It is because he [the home guard] went back [to the village] to work on [his field] and he walked out around and he was injured [by a landmine] and died as there is no one who helps him for the security [guiding around landmines] on the front.

Based on this incident, is it true that the one that you said [the home guard] was injured and he died?

Yes, it is sure.

Was that with the Tatmadaw's landmine?

Yes, with the Tatmadaw's landmine.

They are doing the ceasefire now, but are there any new landmines that the Tatmadaw are planting?

Based on the information that I have received from the village security, although the Tatmadaw are doing the ceasefire, they still use landmines on their side [of the land that the KNU cannot trespass on].

Even though they are doing the ceasefire, do you think it is not a true [genuine] one?

procurement activities, and when other modes of protection are unavailable. For more on the *gher der* see: "[Self-protection under strain: Targeting of civilians and local responses in northern Karen State](#)," KHRG, August 2010.

⁶ For more information on this incident, see "[Hpapun Incident Report: Home guard killed by Tatmadaw landmine in Lu Thaw Township, January 2014](#)," KHRG, June 2014.

We are not satisfied with the ceasefire yet.

What about the villagers' opinions of the Tatmadaw?

The thing that the villagers hope is that the Tatmadaw will withdraw from their villages and not stay anymore so that they will be able to go back and work freely and there will be no obstacles in their village and in their working places.

Now I would like to ask what are your and your villagers' opinions on the Tatmadaw? When they are doing the ceasefire, are they doing a true one or in the wrong way. Is there no frightening [of villagers by the Tatmadaw] anymore?

If they have the mindset [willingness to do the ceasefire], as they are the ones who are going to do the ceasefire, I think there will be no obstacles [for villagers' livelihoods and security] in the country anymore; the villagers are also willing to have [the ceasefire] like that [with no difficult for their livelihoods].

Do you see the Tatmadaw coming to construct the buildings of the village to be better and make any development?

They build their army camps and camp compounds better and build pagodas. I think there is no possibility for them to withdraw.

Were most of the villagers working on the paddy fields or working on the hill fields in the past in your village?

Most of them were working on the paddy fields in the past.

Is there anyone or group who goes back and works on the paddy fields right now?

Related to the paddy fields, they [villagers] presently closed [stopped working on] all of them and they are working on the hill fields [instead]. They cannot consume the rice yet and they are faced with difficulty.

Does it mean there are [censored for security] paddy fields for [censored for security] houses?

There are [censored for security] paddy fields.

How many acres does the largest paddy field have?

It will be five acres.

What about the smallest ones?

One acre.

You cannot and dare not go back and work on any of these fields at the moment?

No, we dare not work on any [of those] fields. They are all in [Tatmadaw] military controlled areas.

How many hours away are the [fields] from the military's location?

It will not be [more than a] half an hour [away by foot].

Is there anything that the military destroys, like cutting down the trees and bamboo or burning down things in their located areas?

In spite of the fact that they are doing a true ceasefire, they will be cutting down all of the trees or bamboo that have been ours since our ancestor's age. Although, even if we had a chance to return, there will be no trees at all. They will destroy them all.

What about the paddy fields? Does [the Tatmadaw] destroy the paddy fields when they construct roads?

Yes, there are three paddy fields which were destroyed.

Is there anything like [the Tatmadaw] giving compensation to the owners when they destroyed the paddy fields?

No, there is no such thing. There will be things like they [the Tatmadaw] oppressing the people more if possible.

Have you heard anything about them selling the paddy fields or confiscating the fields?

There is nothing like that presently, but there are concerns for the future.

Are there any rich persons, like companies, that come in the area where you live?

There are no companies that enter into our area.

Is there anything in the village like soldiers shooting to death the villagers in the past?

There are many villagers that they shot to death in the past.

What about this year or last year?

No, there is no one that they have shot dead. There is only one person [this year] who died; [it was] by landmine.

Do all of the villagers have enough rice in all of the [censored for security] households [from B--- village] this year?

All of them have to face hardships related to rice this year. They all have to struggle. They even cannot support [give] the KNU with rice [this year].

Why did they all have difficulty working on the paddy fields?

It is because of the abnormal rain as well as the activity of the Tatmadaw who come and oppress us and we do not dare to return and work on our places [fields]. It is not going well. Although we plant the paddies, they also do not grow. Another point is that because of the heavy rain, we do not get the food.

How do you manage for your family and your villagers based on the hardship that you have to face [when] working for the food?

Related to working for the food, I cannot help to manage for them anymore. They have to struggle for their livelihoods by themselves, to work as day labours, day by day like that.

It means they have to find a way and manage by themselves? If they do not have the food at all, they will share with one another and borrow from one another.

Yes.

Is there any way that you can get an income in the place that you live?

No, there is no way. It is also very difficult to work for our livelihoods. There is no work. We can only work as a day labourer, day by day, and after we have worked and got the money, it is all gone.

How much do you get per day if you work as a day labourer in the place that you live?

The highest we get is 60 baht (US \$1.83).⁷ It is so difficult.

How much do you have to pay for one big tin⁸ of paddy?⁹

It will be a 100 baht (US \$3.06). So in order to be able to buy the paddy, we cannot buy a big tin in a day. It also causes hardship for the villagers.

Have the villagers ever received any support from anyone in the village this year?

No, there is nothing yet right now.

What about in the past like in the last year or two?

There is only a small amount of KNU's support sometimes if they see that the people are facing extreme trouble.

Is there any emergency support like KORD [Karen Office of Relief and Development] or other support because of insufficient food?

No, there is nothing like that this year or last.

What about last year?

No, there was also nothing.

Is there any school where you live?

There is one school in the place that we live [now].

How many standards does it have?

It has four standards.

⁷ All conversion estimates for the baht in this report are based on the February 2nd 2014 official market rate of 32 baht to the US \$1.

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.

⁹ Paddy is rice grain that is still in the husk.

Who set up this school? Is it because the villagers are very keen and build it up [themselves]? [Or did] some religious organisation or the KNU set it up?

The villagers and the parents [of the children in] school are very eager and set it up.

How many teachers are there [in the school]?

There are five teachers.

Where do they come from?

They are from these regions.

Do they live close to here?

Yes, they live close to here.

Are the teachers single or married?

Most of the teachers are married.

How much money do you provide to the teachers?

The school parents support them 3,000 baht (US \$91.92) per month.

Is it enough for the teachers who are married with 3,000 baht?

It is not enough for them, but since they love their [school] children, they sacrifice themselves and they are working hard.

What about those [teachers] who are single, is it enough for them?

It is also not enough for them but since they love their [school] children, they sacrifice themselves and they are working hard.¹⁰

How many students are there in the school?

There are 68 students.

How much does one student need to pay for the school administration fee?

¹⁰ Here the interviewee repeats the same answer.

Regarding the school administration fee, those who are one standard and above have to pay for one big tin of rice.

What about the nursery school?

Four bowls¹¹ [of rice].

Is it only rice? Are there any other things that they have to pay [for]?

No, they do not have to pay for other things.

To whom do they give it [rice]?

They give it to the school administrator. The school administrator then gives it to the teachers.

Are the students able to learn safely this year?

Yes, it [the school] is running well and they are able to learn safely.

If it is not peaceful, why do you think that is happening?

I think if it is not peaceful, it is because of the Tatmadaw's activity and they cannot go to the school well. And the second one [reason they would not be at school] would be because of their health.

Is there any healthcare in the school compound?

Yes, there is.

Do they have medicine?

Yes, we get some medicine.

What about in the village?

Yes, there is healthcare aid.

¹¹ A bowl is a unit of volume used to measure paddy, milled rice and seeds. One bowl is equivalent to 1.28 kg. or 2.88 lb. of paddy.

Do you have enough medicine?

There is not enough medicine but we receive some of them a little bit by a little bit.

Who takes responsibility [for the security] of the healthcare aid [workers]?

The KNU soldiers [take responsibility].

Is there anything like the KNU disturbing the students?

No, there is not, but if something happens suddenly and there is something to carry, things which sometimes the villager cannot carry all of, the students are asked to help and they also help them like that.

Is there any support which the students receive like books, pens, etc?

Yes, the students get enough support like books and pens every year.

What is the most common disease that people have in the village or in the areas that you live?

There are many different kinds of disease that happen around right now. However, mostly the diseases like lower back pain, malaria and stomachaches happen the most.

If you have these kinds of diseases, do you cure it in the village or where do go to cure it?

If it is not a serious illness and it is able to be cured in the village, we can cure it here. If they cannot cure it here, they send the person to the hospital.

Do you use herbal medicine?

There are some people who know how to use herbal medicine. Nevertheless, most people do not know how to use herbal medicine.

Do sick people get better with herbal medicine?

Some people get better and some do not, but one can get better in many different ways.

Do you see anything like the Tatmadaw coming and doing development in the village?

There is nothing like them coming to develop things and places in the village. There is only one thing that if they have the chance, they will probably expand their controlled areas a bit more and more. They will kill the villagers and they will have a secret plan for us.

And what is your opinion of the KNU soldiers?

I think the KNU soldiers are the same ethnic group as us and there is nothing special to say. There are the things like us joining our hands together, working together and having the network with them, things like that.

Is there anything more that you would like to add about the Tatmadaw, the villagers, and the work that the villagers are doing right now?

My opinion is that based on the villagers' suggestion it is the best for the Tatmadaw to withdraw from the villages and not to be in our areas in order for us to be able to work safely and freely. We hope like that and the KNU will help us find the way for that.

There is nothing else right?

There is nothing else.

Thank you.



The photo on the left was taken on January 31st 2014 and was taken by KHRG researcher. It shows a B--- villager holding their land grant for their paddy field in B--- village. Each of the B--- villagers still has their lands grants, which were provided by the KNU. However, they do not dare to go back to work on their paddy fields as a Tatmadaw army camp is situated near their village. The photo on the right was taken by a C--- village home guard. It shows the home guard, Saw Shwe Thein, who was killed by a landmine villagers believe to have been planted by the Tatmadaw. [Photos: KHRG and C--- village home guards]

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

- “Home Guards attacked by Tatmadaw in Lu Thaw Township, Hpapun District, February 2015,” (April 2015)
- “Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, October to November 2014,” (April 2015)
- “Tatmadaw artillery fire directed at villagers working on hill field farms in Hpapun District, February 2015,” (March 2015)
- “Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, January 2013,” (February 2015)
- “Ongoing militarisation of southeastern Burma/Myanmar, since the January 2012 ceasefire agreement between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burma/Myanmar government,” (February 2015)

Mu Traw (Hpapun) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)