



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

July 28, 2015 / KHRG #14-85-A6-I1

Thaton Interview: Saw A---, October 2014

This Interview with Saw A--- describes events and issues occurring in Bilin Township, Thaton District, during October 2014, including land confiscation, natural resource extraction and education.

- *Saw A--- describes the ongoing confiscation of land and displacement of villagers as ordered by the Tatmadaw over the last 28 years. In the current ceasefire context, villagers have expressed their desire to regain their land and for the Tatmadaw to withdraw from the area.*
 - *Villagers submitted complaint forms to Tatmadaw Light Infantry Division (LID) #44 regarding villagers' plots of land, which are situated near a Tatmadaw army camp. Villagers would like to regain that land and expand an existing road to make travelling easier for local residents.*
 - *Saw A--- also describes local protection strategies used by villagers to protect their land from companies. Villagers hold meetings twice a month to discuss strategies amongst themselves and local villagers are urged not to sell their land to outsiders.*
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Interview | Saw A---, (male, 62), B--- village, Bilin Township, Thaton District (October 2014)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Thaton District in October 2014 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 Thaton District, including six other interviews, nine incident reports, one situation update, 143 photographs and ten video clips.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

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 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 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.

Occupation: Farming a hill field
Position: *[censored for security]*

What is your name?

Saw A----.

How old are you?

I'm 62 years old.

Where do you live?

B---- village.

What is your village tract?

Pa Ya Raw village tract.

What about your township?

Bilin Township.

What about your district?

Doo Tha Htoo [Thaton] District.

What is your nationality?

Karen.

What is your religion?

Buddhist.

What do you do?

Farmer.

Do you have a family?

Yes.

How many children do you have?

I have three children.

What is the age of your eldest child?

18 years old.

What is the age of your youngest child?

14 years old.

Do you have any responsibilities in the village?

Yes. I am a religious leader.

I want to ask you something, after the ceasefire³ took place have you seen anything [the situation] changing?

There are many things changing regarding travelling and earning our livings. In the past we could not travel freely.

Is there any forced labour happening in your village from the Tatmadaw or other armed groups?

Nowadays forced labour is less than in the past which [was] committed by [the] KNU and the Tatmadaw.

Is there an army camp based in your village?

Yes.

Do you remember when the camp was founded?

I do not remember. I [also] never questioned their battalion number. I know they moved their army camp [recently].

How many years have they been living here?

When I came to live here they located their camp next to the monastery, but they moved over to another place. I think they have been living here [for] over 28 years.

Is it located in the village or outside the village?

It is located in the village on the villagers' garden [lands].

Did the villagers have to relocate?

Yes, the villagers relocated because the camp [is] based on their lands. They [the Tatmadaw] tasked the head villager to force the villagers to relocate. Therefore, the head villagers have to find a new place for the villagers to build their houses.

Did they compensate the villagers who have been relocated?

³ 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.

No, they did not compensate the villagers. The land that the head villager told the villagers to build their houses [on] is [land belonging to] other people. At the time the owners of the new land were not living in the village [they lived in other places].

Are there any arguments happening among the villagers?

In the past the villagers did not complain about the land issues because they [were] afraid of the Tatmadaw. After the ceasefire took place the villagers were complaining about an army camp based on their lands. The owners of the lands want to build their houses on their own lands. The [owners of the] lands that the [displaced] villagers are currently living on want their lands back. There are arguments happening among the villagers [because of this].

Did the owners of the lands submit [complaint forms] to the Tatmadaw?

Yes, we submitted [forms to reclaim our lands] one time already, but [it did] not include all the lands [that] had been confiscated, just only the plots of land which are situated in front of the army camp. In front of the army camp there is a road. The plots of land, which are in the eastern part of the village, are next to the army camp, therefore the villagers [do] not dare live very close to the camp [and moved from those plots of land]. When the villagers [relocated to] live on the other villagers' lands, the Tatmadaw based their camp on [those plots of] land and also dug the channel [moat to protect the camp]. We asked for our land back but they [did] not give back our land. After [the] ceasefire took place we talked to them one time [and] they seemed like they wanted to give back our land and they asked an old man [head villager if the plots of land belonged to the villagers]. The head villager told them that [the] plots of land are not any villager's land. It is community land. In the last year we submitted this case to the Light Infantry Division (LID)⁴ [#44] commanders in order to construct [expand] the road but they [did] not agree with us [and they did not take any action]. We told them that we would like to construct [expand] the road starting from the army camp to [the] village but they did not allow us. We told them that the students [in the eastern part] are not able to go to school in the western part of the village because of the flooding and [are] also not able to go where we want to construct [expand the road]. Sometimes we also have to carry the school tools and army tools with [a] cart, but we are not able to travel in the rainy season. We want to construct [expand] this road in order to make [sure] villagers can travel easier. They said if you want to construct [expand] the road, you have to re-fence the camp after you [have] done it. We [villagers] said we would re-fence it for them [Tatmadaw]. Based on this conversation they did not give back our lands to us which had been confiscated. They [Tatmadaw] said they will construct [expand] the road by themselves and [did] not ask the villagers to construct [expand] the road. We told them [Tatmadaw] that, *"The Burma government will construct the road for them [villagers]. The villagers and you guys [Tatmadaw] also do not need to [be] involved in this section [of road construction]. If you [Tatmadaw] will do it for free, you can construct the road and re-fence the camp for us."* The land of the villagers [is] situated in front of the army camp in the eastern [part] of the village, the villagers want to build their houses on that but they [Tatmadaw] did not allow the villagers. We discussed with the land owners one time and we said we will submit the land case to the Burma government and reclaim our lands, then we will establish a clinic on the lands and build shops. For the land owners we will give them a plot of land to build shops. The other villagers who want to build the shops on that land

⁴ Light Infantry Division (Tatmadaw); commanded by a brigadier general, each with ten light infantry battalions specially trained in counter-insurgency, jungle warfare, "search and destroy" operations against ethnic insurgents and narcotics-based armies. LIDs are organised under three Tactical Operations Commands, commanded by a colonel, (three battalions each and one reserve), one field artillery battalion, one armoured squadron and other support units.

they have to buy it. The land owners did not allow us [to build the shops when we discussed it with them]. Later on we told them [land owners] that there was only land for the villagers [community], so we have planned to build [a] clinic. When we said it to them like that the owners gave permission to build a clinic, but the Tatmadaw [did] not allow us.

So you want to build a clinic but they [will] not allow you?

Currently they [do] not allow us to build [a] clinic. If we really want to build a clinic we have to talk to LID [#44] again. Now the problem is that the villagers want to get back their land but there is no easy [way] to get their land back.

Is there any conflict happening between the villagers and the Tatmadaw?

After [the] ceasefire took place, the villagers had no conflict between them [and the Tatmadaw]. They leave the villagers alone. This is a good thing. In the past the villagers [did] not dare travel at night time, but now they can travel [whenever they want].

The army base [is] in your village, so do they cut [villagers'] trees to repair their camp?

Currently, the villagers are not complaining about that. In the past they [Tatmadaw] asked the head villager when they needed something. We decided where they should get it [bamboo, trees or thatch shingles]. It is very uncomfortable for the head villagers. Currently, they do not ask permission from [the] head villager. They do it by themselves. It impacted some villagers' bamboo trees. At the bottom of the cliff there is no longer [any] bamboo trees because the [Tatmadaw] cut down all the villagers' bamboo trees. They cut the bamboo and took the part of it which they needed.

Did the owners of it [bamboo] report it to them [Tatmadaw]?

I think none of them reported it.

Why [did] they not report it?

I think even if they talked to them they [Tatmadaw] definitely [would] ignore them.

Are they not daring to tell them?

They [do] not dare talk to them. The villagers [also] already knew that even if they tell them, they [Tatmadaw] will ignore it, therefore they did not report the cases.

Do you know the name of the bamboo owners?

The place where I work is the plantation based near the bamboo plantation. It is the monk's bamboo plantation but he himself does not say anything because he is very old. I think his children will complain about that because they cut down all the bamboo and palm trees. Sometimes we think that it is better to let them cut down the trees so the village head will have less duties to manage. Sometimes we show them the place where they have to cut the [bamboo and trees] because we are familiar with villagers.

The Tatmadaw located their camp here. They [cut down trees and bamboo] everything that they need for their camp. As you are [censored for security] did you do anything for the owners to get [them] compensation?

If a villager's plantations are negatively impacted the concern [is] for the owners and I [will] talk to them [the Tatmadaw] and try to get some compensation for the owners, but it might not [be] satisfactory for the owners. If we compare to the past they did not give any compensation. Now, if the owner expected 5,000 kyat (US \$4.56),⁵ they give 2,000 kyat (US \$1.83) to [each] owner for [each] thatch shingle and bamboo pole.

How do you feel when they [Tatmadaw] are living here?

Now they [do] not disturb the villagers, instead they help the villagers in terms of education and medical treatment when the villagers are not feeling well. Sometimes the military medic came to the villages and checked the health of the villagers. If the villagers have serious diseases they take action and send the patient to the towns. It is kind of useful and also not useful [as they destroyed the villagers' plantations].

You said they [are] looking after the patients in your village? So did they ask for money?

We do not give them money. If they have enough medicine they [will] give [some] to us, but if they do not have any they find it [medicines] as they can. If the [required] medicines are being sold [available] in a shop, we have to buy it ourselves.

What do you think about them [being] based in your village? Is it good or bad for the villagers?

In some ways they are useful for the villagers, but on the other hand if they [were] not based in the village it would be much better for the villagers. All the villagers hope they [will] withdraw their camp. If only [the] villagers are in the village we can live peacefully. We live with worries and [are] afraid because the Tatmadaw located their army camp in our village. If there is no army camp the villagers will be so happy.

After the ceasefire took place [have] any development [projects] taken place in your village?

Now there is a C--- clinic and school. The Tatmadaw [are] also involved in the development.

Did they build the new high school?

Yes, they [Burma/Myanmar government] finished building a new high school for ten students with two rooms.

How many buildings have they planned to build?

They have planned to build two floors of [the] school. The school headmaster wrote [a] proposal to [the Burma/Myanmar government] for five million kyat (US \$4,585.30) not

⁵ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 26th May 2015 official market rate of 1090.44 kyat to the US \$1.

including payments to the builders. The school headmaster rewrote the proposal again to include all the expenditures of the school and asked for 50 million kyat (US \$45,853.05).

Have they finished building the [clinic]?

That clinic was constructed a long time ago. They [health department in C--- area] wrote [a] proposal to the government. I think they will support only a hospital. If they build [a] hospital they might withdraw the [construction of the] clinic.

You said they wrote a proposal for the school and clinic, so they wrote a proposal to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or [to the] Burma government?

They wrote [the] proposal to the Burma government.

The school that they built - did the government support the school?

General Min Aung Hlaing⁶ himself donated 250,000 kyat (US \$228.25) for [the] school. We built [the] school for that amount of money. That amount of money [was] enough for the body of the school and the roof of the school, but for the other needs of the villagers, they themselves had to support it. Later on he donated [a total of] 8,000,000 [kyat] (US \$ 7,184.00).

General Min Aung Hlaing donated 250,000 [and then more, for a total up] to 8,000,000 [kyat]?

Yes, all the money that reached our hands is that amount of money. I think it might be more than that because they [top leaders] took some money [for their own benefit], therefore we received that amount of money [8,000,000 kyat].

Do you think that amount of money is from the Burma government?

Yes.

The construction does not include [the involvement of] any other NGOs?

Yes, [no other NGO involvement]. They had planned to build the new school within two floors because the state administrator had assessed the school. They want to build a new school because the school [is] too old already.

How many households are there in B--- village?

When I was [censored for security] there were [censored for security] households. Currently they [Burma/Myanmar government census team] are registering the household numbers. There might be two or three houses in a family but they list down the name of villagers together with their parents [in the same household number] even though they [villagers] live in different houses. If they [do] not count the household number in that way there might be around [censored for security]. The villagers in our village do not want to talk about the census system. The KNU and the government are using the same

⁶ General Min Aung Hlaing is the current Commander in Chief of the Myanmar Armed Forces. He has aspirations to be the next President of Burma/Myanmar. For more information please see: "[Military MP Says Army Chief Could Become Candidate for President](#)," *The Irrawaddy*, November 2013.

census system. In terms of land measurement the villagers have ten acres of land but they [KNU and Burma/Myanmar government] state it [is] only five acres of land. This census takes place in almost all villages. As the administrator said if they separate the households differently it might be around *[censored for security]*.

You said for education [the Burma/Myanmar government supports the school], right? So middle school students have to buy notebooks?

Now the students have to buy notebooks.

What about the primary school's students?

They do not have to buy [them]. They [Burma/Myanmar government] gave books and pencils to the students.

What about the teachers? Did the villagers have to look for [a] teacher?

No, the teachers are from the [Burma/Myanmar] government.

How many teachers are there in the school?

There are 27 teachers.

So are they all government teachers?

Yes because there are no [Karen] teachers [in our village].

Do they teach Karen language?

Currently they [do] not teach, but I heard they will allow us to teach [Karen language]. We need a teacher. In the past Thara D--- taught the children in the village. He was supported by [the] KNU. Now he [has] quit [being a] teacher so there is no teacher who [can teach the] Karen language in school.

Are there any people [who] can teach the Karen language?

There is a cleaner in the school. I think she can teach. If they [leaders] pointed us [in the right direction] to find a teacher we might ask her.

Are you enthusiastic about letting your children learn [the] Karen language?

We support every kind of education. We let the children learn Lee Hsaw Weh [a traditional Karen script]⁷ and [the] bible as well. There are no people [who] can speak Pwo Karen. The children learn [the] Karen language in Sunday school but they [the children] are not able to teach [because they only have one lesson a week]. They are able to read.

Do the villagers have to support the teachers with daily food?

⁷ This is name of the traditional Karen script. The language sounds the same when spoken aloud but the writing is different. The alphabet is similar to the Chinese alphabet.

They [Burma/Myanmar government do] not force us to support [them]. The teachers are very good to the students. In the towns, the students have to pay tuition, but here, if the students are close to exam time, they [teachers] provide them with private tutoring classes [for free] in the school. Based on [the fact] that we support the teachers, therefore, they [teachers] do not need to buy the rice. We collect the rice from the villagers.

What about food?

We [do] not support them with other food, only rice.

What about traveling fees?

They pay themselves. Sometimes, if they know the motorboat owner the boat owner will not ask for money from them.

What do the villagers do for their living?

Almost all of the villagers work in cultivation and farming.

Do they have enough food for a year?

They do not have enough food in B--- village [for some households]. [For example], if there are 300 households there will be [enough food for only] 100 households.

What do they [the villagers who do not have enough food] do for their living?

If they give their time to work they can earn their living. There are many [types of] work. If they do labour work they can earn daily food. They can earn 3,000 kyat (US \$2.74) per day from cutting grass. If there are five people in a family and three people do labour work they can earn this amount of money. They [some villagers do] not work; if they worked they could earn [a] living.

So we can say that there is no jobless person in your village?

Yes.

Are there any villagers [who] go to work in other countries?

Some youths are going to work in Bangkok and some of them work on the border. The people who work on the border always come back on New Year.

Which part of the border?

In E--- area. They work in Thai Karen villages.

Do they face any difficulties?

Maybe some of them will face difficulties. For us, before they go we told them that if you face any difficulty you should contact the people who work for [migrant workers]. I heard

one of them got in trouble in terms of rape. She did not want to get married but because of the rape she married the attacker; it happens to some people.⁸

Are there any brokers who [drive the workers halfway to their destination], take their money and not get them to the place that they want to go?

I know two people [brokers] in my village but they drove the people to the places that they wanted to go. I don't know when they got to Bangkok, maybe they [brokers] will ask another broker who lives in Bangkok [to look for a job for workers].

When they get there what kind of problems do they face?

Some of them have no jobs and some of them lost earnings because the broker took away their salary from them. Mostly this happens in Thailand.

How much do they [brokers] ask for in terms of money from each person?

In the past, they asked for 200,000 kyat (US \$182.57) but now I do not know how much they ask for. They do not influence the people [they only drive them]. The people [villagers] want to go [to Bangkok] and they drive them.

Do they force them to go, for example, "Go with me; I will find a job for you?"

No, they [do] not force them. Most of the people who want to go there asked the broker to send them and gave them money.

What about other villages [close to your village]; did anything happen like that?

I am not certain about that.

What do you think [about] the [preliminary ceasefire agreement] between [the] KNU and [the] Burma government?

In my opinion, I think it is very good because we have been acting in the role of revolution for around 66 years. The soldiers might be tired and the villagers [are] also tired. Now the ceasefire [has] taken place so the soldiers and villagers can travel freely and we are very pleased. We also want peace. Nowadays [in the ceasefire period] instead of fighting with each other [the KNU and the Tatmadaw] should live peacefully. We can travel freely. Now many of them [soldiers] are able to come back and meet their families and friends in the village. When I saw it, it brought back my memories of soldiers who passed away. If they were here in [the] current time they would be so pleased. We feel guilty [and] sorry for them.

Is there any company [who] has come to your village to do logging, stone mining or to establish [an] industrial zone?

In my village I have not seen [this] yet. Now other people [who live in towns] are not allowed in our area. We [do] not allow them because we do not want to lose our land. This is our strategic [plan] to protect our lands. We call [a] meeting twice a month, always. We told them [villagers in the meeting] that we have to own our own lands so

⁸ In traditional Karen culture, if a girl is raped she may feel pressured into marrying her attacker, as this is seen as a way for her to save her dignity, although attitudes towards this in Karen culture are changing.

you are not allowed to sell away your lands to the people who live in the towns. You can sell it to your neighbours. Even if they have a lot of money and [offer to] buy the land at a high price, you are not allowed to sell. If you really want to sell you have to inform the [village head]. If the company [really] wants to [be] active in our area they will not come to us; they will go directly to the district [administrator]. If they allow them we are not able to stop them. We can evaluate if [development projects] will bring benefits for the villagers or not.

If the area leaders allow them to do development [projects], how can you protect it?

If they allow them and it [does] not cause any impact and brings benefits for the villagers we will let them do [it], but if it impacts the villagers' [lands or anything else] we will protest against the project. Now, at B--- cliff, they [company] are mining stone. Before they did it they let us know and we allowed them. We let them mine only the big stones which have fallen to the bottom of B--- cliff, because there are many [of these] stones which you can mine. We told them that, *"You are not allowed to mine B--- cliff. You can mine [only] the stones which fall to the ground at the bottom of B--- cliff."*

After they mine the stones what will they use it for?

They said they [will] use it for road construction. They will construct the road starting from P'Nweh Klah to Lay Kay.⁹

Do you know the miners?

Yes, I know Thara Way La. He informed the township administrator they will begin stone mining.

You said the stone mining took place near your village?

Yes.

So did they give [donate] any [money] for your village?

Now we are in the talking process. If they do the mining they plan to give some [money] to the village. In the village some people do not have jobs so we think if we allow them to do mining the villagers also will get jobs. If they sold all the stone that they have been mining they will help [donate some money] to the village.

Did they say [they would pay money] or [have they] already signed [a] contract?

They [have] not given any contract; they just said [they would provide money]. We believe them and they also told [the] head villager. They have not sold the stone yet.

Which payment system did they use? Were they paid daily or paid depending on the amount of stone collected?

⁹ For more information see, ["Thaton situation update: Bilin, Thaton, Kyaikto and Hpa-an Townships September to November 2014,"](#) KHRG 2015.

I heard the workers who dig the stone by their hands got paid 13,000 kyat (US \$11.50) [per unknown amount of stone]. For the people who collect the stone and turn it into gravel got paid 10,000 kyat (US \$9.13) [per unknown amount of stone].

Did they meet only [the] head villager not including villagers?

In our village, if the head villagers agree, the villagers also agree. We are also concerned for the villagers. If it will impact the villagers we [will] not let them do it, therefore they [villagers do] not say anything.

So the villagers already built your trust?

Yes.

Now they [company] will come and construct the road [P’Nweh Klah to Lay Kay]?

I do not know. It depends on the government. If they order the people to do [it] then the project will start.

How about this year?

I heard the road construction cannot reach to B--- [village] it can reach to Lah Hkoh [village]. I’m not sure about whether they will put gravel on the road all the way to B--- village.

You said when Win Laing came to meet you he [did] not tell you detailed information?

In [the] last year he took responsibility to construct the road in Ler Klaw to Lay Kay. U Ye Tun¹⁰ took responsibility starting from Ler Klaw to Ta Hpaw. He [Win Laing] said in order to construct the road they need gravel so he asked permission from us to mine the stone.

When did they start mining the stone?

They started it in early rainy season.

Which month?

In April. They [company] asked the villagers who wanted to mine stone. The villagers are free to do it if they want to. They [villagers] are not organising themselves to do stone mining.

Would you like to say anything that I have not asked about?

We are Karen people; we love our nation based on the preliminary ceasefire that took place. We have seen that [KNU and Tatmadaw] battalion commanders and company commanders [who live in B--- village] dare to meet each other. If they are nice to each

¹⁰ U Ye Tun is a private business owner and has been known to purchase raw lumber from Kyaukkyi and Mone townships in areas villagers had tried to protect from logging. Further, in 2013 U Ye Tun confiscated 200 acres of land for a commercial rubber plantation project. For more information see, [*With only our voices, what can we do?: Land confiscation and local responses in southeast Myanmar*](#), KHRG 2015.

other, we [the villagers], will also [be] nice to them. If the villagers make a mistake they [KNU] can also correct them because we are under the control of the KNU. If they [KNU] make a mistake, they also should listen to the villagers. Some of them [villagers] do not dare to tell them. I told the [Tatmadaw] you have to understand that for [KNU or villagers] they live in [the] jungle, they are not able to think like you because you live in the town. In some Karen armed groups, some soldiers hold the position of commanders but they [do] not speak like commanders because they use drugs. We need the people [KNU leaders] to give understanding [to the soldiers on how to build trust between villagers and soldiers].

What about other things?

I want the [preliminary] ceasefire to be stable; if it [is] stable the villagers and soldiers can live [together] peacefully.

Do you have any other thing to say?

No

Thank you.

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

- *'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)
- "Thaton incident report: UNHCR begins development project in Bilin Township, May 2014," (June 2015)
- "Thaton situation update: Bilin Township, August to October 2014," (April 2015)
- "Thaton situation update: Bilin and Hpa-an Townships, June to November 2014," (February 2015)

Doo Tha Htoo (Karen)

