Interview August 31, 2018 / KHRG #16-110-A4-I1

Nyaunglebin Interview: Saw Ga---, December 2016

This Interview with Saw Ga--- describes a case of land confiscation relating to road construction in Kyaukkyi Township, Nyaunglebin District. It also provides information on development projects, a proposed hydropower dam and a large-scale logging venture.

- This interview describes a road construction that was conducted by Tatmadaw in Gb--- village without prior notification or consultation with villagers residing in that area. Village-level authorities signed the agreement of the road construction with Tatmadaw hoping that they [villagers] would have a better road for transportation. Although this road will improve the transportation of the local community, the local community is worried that it will increase land confiscations in the area.
- There was a proposed dam construction in Nyaunglebin District. The local community is worried that their lands will be flooded by the dam.

Interview | Saw Ga---, (male, 34), Gb--- village, Kyaukkyi Township, Nyaunglebin District (December 2016)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Nyaunglebin District on and is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security. This interview was received along with other information from Nyaunglebin District, including six other interviews, six incident reports and 106 photographs.

Ethnicity: Karen Religion: Christian Marital Status: N/A

Occupation: Farming a hill field

Position: Village head

What is your name?

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¹ KHRG trains community members in southeastern 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 southeastern 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.

Where do you live? I live in Gb---, Ken Doe village tract. What is your religion? I am a Christian. What is your ethnicity? I am Karen. Which Township do you live in? Ler Doh [Kyaukkyi] Township. What do you work as? I work on a farm. How many households are there in your village? There are [censored] households in my village. How many people are there in your village? There are [censored] people in my village. What do villagers in your village mostly do in order to support livelihood? Villagers mostly work on the farms and hill plantations. What kind of school is there in your village? The school is a post-primary school. So, it is a middle school. Can every child study at the school?

My name is Saw Ga---.

they do not go to the school.

Our school is up to 8th Standard.

What standard is your school up to?

What about healthcare? Are there any clinics in your village?

How old are you?

I am 34 years old.

No. Not every child can study at the school. Some children cannot go to the school because their parents cannot afford to send them to the school. Some children do not want to study so

There is one clinic in our village. This clinic was built by Military Operations Command #10.

Did they [Tatmadaw³] come and construct the clinic by themselves?

Yes. They [Tatmadaw] came and constructed the clinic by themselves, but nobody works at the clinic regularly.

Does nobody work at the clinic?

Yes. No doctor works at the clinic, only Tatmadaw military's captain works at the clinic.

Can he [captain] work at the clinic?

Yes. If villagers are sick, they can go and call him for help. If no one calls him, he goes out for a drink or he just goes back to his army camp.

Did the villagers build the clinic?

Captain [Tatmadaw] constructed this clinic but villagers also helped Tatmadaw to build it.

As I asked about the school before, who constructed the school?

Tatmadaw came and constructed the school in our village.

When was the school constructed?

The school was constructed in 2014, but I do not remember the specific day and month.

Did villagers have to support school construction?

Yes. Villagers had to carry sands, stones, woods and bamboos to construct the school but mostly, Tatmadaw built it.

Do you know of any development projects that happened in your area?

There is a development project [regarding education] in our area. This development project is set to improve the situation for our children in our village because our children cannot go to the school in Kyaukkyi Town after they finish primary school here. It is too far for our children to go to and study there [Kyaukkyi] so a middle school was constructed in our village as a result of the project. We do not have enough school teachers. Some school teachers have to go back [to towns] for their further study. Therefore, the rest of the school teachers struggle with teaching.

What about other development projects?

No. There are no other development projects in our village.

How about development projects like improving access to water?

³ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military throughout KHRG's 25 year reporting period. The Myanmar military were commonly referred to by villagers in KHRG research areas as SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) from 1988 to 1997 and SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) from 1998 to 2011, which were the Tatmadaw-proclaimed names of the military government of Burma. Villagers also refer to Tatmadaw in some cases as simply "Burmese" or "Burmese soldiers".

Now the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People (CIDKP) comes to help villagers to get access to water and they also improve animal husbandry services, especially raising goats. In addition, the Rural Development Department donated batteries and solar panels to the local villagers.

When did the CIDKP start their projects [in your village]?

They started their projects this year. They try to help villagers to get access to water. They conduct an animal husbandry project and an agricultural project.

What about other development projects such as road construction in your area?

Yes. There is a road construction project in our area. Currently, there are four people including me who want to have the road construction project. The other three people do not understand enough about the project so I led and organized the process and then I signed the paper for road construction project because I want to have a better road in our area. I want my villagers to travel easily and transport things easily, especially when they go to school or when they have to go to the hospital.

Who conducts this development project [road construction]?

Ministry of Border Affairs conducts this road construction project.

You want to submit a request for a road construction project. So how did you request for it? What kind of request?

To request for a road construction project, I discussed with battalion commander from Infantry Battalion #57 and I signed the request form and we submitted it. I just wanted to have a better road for my villagers to travel and transport easily.

I mean how did you report it? Which way did you report it?

Battalion commander from Infantry Battalion #57 told me that it costs 30,000 or 40,000 kyat to hire someone to travel so it will better for you [villagers] and me if the road is constructed better. Then, he just asked me to report it [road construction project] to upper leaders [the government].

What is the name of that battalion commander?

Tin Maung Kyaw.

Based on what you said, you and villagers wanted to have a better road so you submitted a report about it? Or did you follow the battalion commander's plan?

No. It was not like that. I wanted to have a better road and battalion commander also wanted to have it. We both agreed to have a road construction project. We [battalion commander and interviewee] thought that it would benefit us if the road is constructed. It does not matter to us if the road is not constructed because we do not lose anything whether the road is constructed or not. Thus, we [the battalion commander and interviewee] negotiated with each other and we understood each other. Our villagers will be happy if a better road is constructed. The car accidents would also reduce.

The paper that you signed, did the villagers write the information on it by themselves?

No. The battalion commander gave me that paper to sign. How can we write about it? We are not educated enough. The battalion commander wrote it wisely.

So the battalion commander wrote the report and gave it to you and you just signed it. Right?

Yes. I just signed it. I would be happy if a better road is constructed. So I signed it.

As you signed and reported it, did you get to know how the situation developing after you submitted the request?

No. We did not know anything [about the situation] after we requested it. We just requested it and it is done. We just wanted to have a better road. We did not know how it is developing. We submitted the request to the Township administrator, Minister of Bago Division, village tract leaders. We requested it from everyone.

However, none of them updated you about it?

Yes. No one updated me. We did not know anything about the road construction project.

Is the road project being conducted now?

The grandfather told us that the road project is conducted. Otherwise, we would not know anything.

So the road project is being conducted now but nobody told you to manage or lead road construction project in Kel Der village tract. Right?

Yes. Nobody told me. We did not know anything.

OK. You submitted a request but you did not know anything how it was going. Right?

Yes.

So village tract leaders [including you] requested it but when the project started being conducted, they were not updated about the project. Right?

Yes.

Currently, do companies or Tatmadaw conduct the road construction?

Tatmadaw conducts the road construction.

How wide and long is the road that is being constructed?

We requested for a better road but when we asked the backhoe driver (an old man) about how wide the road is. He said that the road is constructed for 46 feet and 50 feet wide. Two cars can easily drive on it at the same time. Some people do not want this road constructed because they do not know how good the road is. However, it will be better for our villagers if a better road is constructed.

Do you think this road construction can cause harm and damage to villagers' lands and farms?

Now we do not hear any complaints. However, when the road was constructed from Tar Bo village to Ywar D'Kaung village, some villagers' trees were destroyed. It is just four or five trees.

It is not a lot and villagers also do not say anything about it because it would be for the better if a better road.

Do you think this road construction caused harm and damage to villagers' lands and farms in your [Ken Doe] village tract?

Yes, but I think only a few things [land and trees] will be destroyed. However, I can take responsibility to solve this problem because just a few things will be destroyed.

What about the compensation? Are there any compensations for villagers whose lands or farms are destroyed due to road construction?

No. There is no compensation.

Do you know which battalion of Tatmadaw manages to conduct the road construction?

No. We do not know. Nobody informed or told me about who conduct the road construction. That is why it pissed me off a little bit.

the Tatmadaw prior inform villagers about the consequences of the road construction? For example, how many lands and farms could be destroyed, how wide the road is set to be, what benefits villagers will get.

No. The Tatmadaw did not explain anything to the villagers. They are just constructing the road by themselves.

When the project was allowed to be implemented, village tract leaders were not informed, so they did not know anything about it. Right?

Yes.

If we look at the situation, Tatmadaw did not explain anything to the villagers but they are constructing the road. You were not allowed to lead the management of the road construction. So do you think that the road construction can benefit the community?

It will be good for us if a better road is constructed because we can travel easily.

Do you think it can benefit the villagers?

As I previously mentioned above, we are happy if the road is better because if we are sick, we can go to the hospital [in town] quicker and easier. It will benefit the community.

I mean you requested for a road construction project but you were not allowed to lead the management of the road construction. How do you think of it?

I want to say about it. I was not allowed to lead a road construction project, although I requested it. It seemed like the Tatmadaw did not recognise me. I felt sorry about it as a resident local leader. I know that I have weaknesses as a resident local leader, but Tatmadaw is constructing the road without recognizing my authority [after I granted them the permission]. However, they thought that they are doing well. I think that the Tatmadaw should let the villagers know about the consequences, what the difficulties are, and what the budget of the road project is. They should consult with villagers and they should let villagers know if the road construction can cause any land destruction. If Tatmadaw does not recognize villagers' authority or if they constructed the road by their own - it must be good. If it is not good or if problems emerge, I will be a person who is responsible for it. What I mean is, we do not know exactly what the consequences may be like.

So you did not know the budget of this road construction project?

No. I do not know anything about that. A budget was provided for the road construction project but I do not know how much money will be used for the project.

What do local villagers think about it?

As I told you before, villagers can travel easily if a better road is constructed. It will be safer for the villagers. If the road is better, villagers will not need to worry too much when they travel. Therefore, the villagers agreed to this road construction project.

OK. The villagers agreed to a better road being constructed. However, villagers requested for it and the villagers were not allowed to conduct this road construction project. What do villagers think about it?

Even though the villagers are aware of the situation, what can they do? It is not in their hands. They cannot do anything. If they are told that the road project is good, they will think it is good. If they are told that the road project is bad, they will think it is bad. Villagers agreed to this project so they can travel easily. They do not understand anything about how to manage a road construction project due to the link of information and transparency in the road construction of the.

What about you? You requested it but you are not allowed to manage the project. You were also not informed of the budget that will be used for Mu Thel- Kyaukkyi road project. So how do you feel about it?

I understand that the budget is provided for road construction project, but even I am a resident local leader [authority], I do not know anything about the budget.

I mean, how do you feel about it?

Yes. I requested it and I do not know anything about how the project is going. So I was feeling a bit angry. How do I put this? To do the work, we have to work hand in hand so it will be better. If the Tatmadaw have difficulties, we should contribute because this road project is for everyone. Everyone should partake in it.

It seems like you were ignored. So how do you feel about it?

The road construction project is conducted in Gb--- village, Ken Doe village tract, Kyaukkyi Township, Bago Division. However, we, the villagers here, do not know anything about how it is going. Even I do not know anything. I feel really hurt but I am thankful for the project. The Tatmadaw should let the village leaders know about that. They should avoid the villagers' lands in order not to construct the road on their lands. I want to say about it.

Do you think it can benefit the community? Do you think the road construction project can help villagers to travel more easily or not? What do you think of it?

As I said before, a better road should be constructed to improve the transportation for the community. It will be better for villagers to travel if a better road is constructed. The commodity price would reduce. For example, if one snack currently costs 200 kyat [USD 0.15]⁴, it would cost 150 [USD 0.11] kyat if the transportation is improved. We expect good things like this. Now

⁴ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 21/06/2018 official market rate of 1,375 kyats to US \$1.

[interview period], Tatmadaw conducts the road construction, but I am not in a position to manage it. I am not sure whether I was ignored or not. Maybe, I am not qualified to lead the project.

I mean, this is just your feelings and your view. They Tatmadaw are dishonest to you as you are not allowed to know about the road construction project's plan. So what do you think of the road that they construct? What is their real purpose behind the road?

In my opinion, I think that the Tatmadaw will do their best to construct the road, but I do not know about what they will do after the road is finished. If the road is finished, we are not sure whether companies will come to our village or not. Villagers are happy if they can travel more easily. We do not know whether the gold mining or stone mining will be conducted after the road is finished. We are not sure whether companies will come to do logging in our area.

What do you and the villagers mostly concern about?

If a better road is constructed, companies can come to our area. We worry that companies will conduct gold mining or stone mining. It can be many things. We concern that companies will do logging in our area. We cannot do anything if they companies do it. All we can do is to worry. The local villagers will be in trouble if these kinds of activities happen.

So it seems like the companies will come to take away the rights of local residents if a better road is constructed?

Yes. It seems like that. However, we see that this road is good for villagers but we do not know if companies will trick villagers if they come. If they come, they might negotiate with Tatmadaw to conduct logging or gold mining. We are not sure about the consequences. If the villagers complain or report it, it will only affect community administrators.

If the road is constructed, companies and wealthy individuals might come to the village. Therefore, the villagers worry that the business companies and wealthy individual people will manipulate them. Right?

Yes. We worry that the companies and wealthy individuals will manipulate our villagers.

Are there any human rights abuses in your area?

Currently, there are no human rights abuses in our area.

Are there any confiscations in your area?

[Tatmadaw] Headquarters commander came to donate a tractor to our village, but battalion commander from IB #57 confiscated the tractor and he took it with him when he went back. We did not regain our confiscated tractor yet. The villagers wanted to cultivate the land with the tractor but now they can only cultivate the land with their buffalos. However, our buffalos are very tired of cultivating.

Did headquarters commander give villagers the tractor according to villager' request?

No. I requested the tractor from headquarters commander. Then he donated the tractor to our village, but the battalion commander confiscated it.

So you requested it on behalf of the village. Right?

Yes.

Who is headquarters commander? What is his name?

I forget his name. He is a headquarters commander from southern command headquarters in Bago Division.

Who confiscated your tractor?

Battalion Commander Tin Maung Kyaw from IB #57 confiscated it.

What did he tell you when he took away your tractor?

He said that he would bring the tractor with him to his army camp and he will not take it for himself. He just borrowed it and he said that he will return it after he uses it. I told him, "what will you do if the tractor is broken?". He told me, "Do not worry and I will return it to you after I use it".

When did he confiscate the tractor?

In July 2016. He did not return it to me. He took it back with him when he left the village. I was angry about it. Headquarters commander came with me to the field when we used the tractor, he was walking in the mud.

So the battalion commander confiscated it and took it with him, correct?

Yes. He [the battalion commander] confiscated the tractor and he carried it with a truck. We have pictures of it. The tractor is very big.

Do you want to report anything that I did not ask you about?

I want to report on the proposed dam. Local villagers have concerns about it. Villagers wonder where they are going to live if the dam is implemented. Therefore, we have to consider it and think about it wisely. It is very important. We already talked about it in the meeting yesterday. Even though the dam is not yet implemented, our lands are flooded in the rainy season. So if the dam is finished, our lands and houses will completely be flooded. Think about it. Therefore, villagers reported that we have to let our leaders know about the situation and they will know how to decide whether the dam should be implemented or not. Sometimes the villagers have to live in fear. Villagers said that they will have to live in a difficult situation if their lands are flooded. That is why I want to speak it on behalf of the villagers. We are worried that our lands will be flooded if the dam is finished.

If our lands are flooded, where are we going to live? You have to find a place for us to live. We called a meeting with the villagers. Some of them did not come to the meeting even though they knew that they had to. They did not want to attend the meeting. They said that they did not even want to work on the farms anymore when they heard about the proposed dam. They said they will ride their buffaloes and they will sit on their buffaloes if their lands are flooded. I told them not to worry too much and that we have our leaders who will solve this problem.

Who will conduct the dam construction?

I do not know but I heard that the KNU and Norwegians are discussing the dam. On 6th, December, Tomorrow and the day after tomorrow, a group of people will come here. They are the people who will investigate the situation.

Regarding the proposed dam, what was explained to the villagers or you?

We were explained that there are some people who will investigate this situation, some people who will test the dam, some who will construct the dam and some who will interview the villagers. They all are foreigners, not from Myanmar. The KNU form brigade 6 told villagers yesterday that they will not be dishonest with the villagers and they do the best according to the rule. It was such a relief to hear when the KNU told villagers that. We told the KNU, "it is good when we hear such words. We heard a lot of rumours regarding the proposed dam and villagers do not understand the situation clearly based on what they heard. They worry too much about it"

Regarding the proposed dam, what do you think about it? Some KNU leaders might have explained to you a bit. You might have had a discussion with them. Based on what you know, what do you think about it? How will the KNU do about the proposed dam? What do you think about it?

The KNU leaders said that they will solve the problem immediately. They will do it step by step. It depends on the villagers. Villagers' opinions and feelings about the proposed dam should be reported. It is not that the dam will not be implemented. The dam will be implemented but they have to consider the consequences that will affect the villagers' rights. So the KNU will do it step by step. Some villagers said that their lands are flooded in the rainy season even though the dam is not implemented. So if the dam is finished, our lands and houses will be completely be flooded. Some wisely worry about their livelihoods. Therefore, I cannot say anything back to the villagers. Villagers are right and the leaders are right. That is why I became a person who is stuck between the villagers and the leaders. I do not know what I should report.

What about other things? Do you have anything else to add?

I want to talk about driving motorbikes. Now people in our area are allowed to drive motorbikes freely at night and day. Firstly, people are driving their motorbikes at night, but they do not fix their motorbike exhaust pipes so it is very noisy when they drive at night. Therefore, it disturbs other people when they sleep or people whose health conditions are not good.

Secondly, people sing karaoke songs by using speakers. It is very noisy at night. It disturbs other people and they come to report it to me. People who sing are noisy when I am absent from the village. However, it is fine if I stay in the village. I want to say that small cases can become big cases. It caused a conflict between two households.

Thirdly, some KNLA⁵ soldiers visited the village without wearing their soldier uniforms, they drank alcohol in the village and got very drunk. Then, they asked Bamar [ethnically Burmese people] to drive car together with them and they tried to disturb the Bamar people. Therefore, I want our leaders to give lessons to some KNLA soldiers because we do not want that people of other ethnicities look down on Karen people due to their actions. Par Kher's group [KNLA soldiers] came to the village and got very drunk. Then, they pointed their guns at the village at night. There were only ten of them. Bamar people observed their situation. When they are in the village, they probably want to show who they are. That is why I want our leaders made aware of this situation. It is fine if they drink alcohol. I also drink it, but we should have a limit for drinking. It is not good if we drink too much alcohol and get very drunk to the point where other people look down on us. The KNLA soldiers' leaders such as battalion commander and operations commanders do not know anything about this situation. The KNLA soldiers drink alcohol and they get drunk. When they get drunk, they sit and talk about economy and politics in Karen and Burmese languages. Their language skills are very confusing. If I listen and look at them, I am very ashamed of them.

⁵ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the KNU.

So how do you address as the problems of loudspeakers, drinking and motorbike noise?

I told villagers not to drive a motorbike without exhaust pipes and villagers are allowed to sing karaoke songs until 9 p.m. at night. If other people dislike the karaoke singing and want to complain, they can come to report it to me. For example, they can report it to me like: "I cannot sleep when I hear it [karaoke] because my baby is young". If they report it to me like that, I can go to tell people who sing karaoke songs not to do it anymore. It is fine with me. For motorbikes, I do not accept it if they drive a motorbike without its exhaust pipe because it makes a lot of noise. I always tell the people about it. The more I tell them, the less they do it.

So you can deal with them so far?

Yes. I can deal with my villagers in my village.

What about other things? Do you have to say anything more?

I want to talk about the educational situation. In our village, we do not have enough teachers for the school because there are a lot of students. It is hard for few teachers to teach a large number of students. Therefore, it affects the quality of education.

Secondly, the school in our village is a Burma/Myanmar government school, but one Karen teacher raised the Karen flag in front of the school. Tatmadaw operations commander told us that he will not object if the Karen flag is raised in front of the Karen school. However, he said that the Karen flag should not be put in front of the Burma/Myanmar government school or the Karen flag should be kept shorter than the Myanmar national flag.

Ko Sho Bar did not like it so he took the Karen flag down. It is not appropriate to take a flag down like that. Both the Karen and Myanmar people should negotiate with each other to take the flag down. You should not be able to take the flag down because of anger. It should be discussed beforehand.

Nobody will say anything [against] if you put the Karen flag in front of your Karen school, but this is a Burma/Myanmar government school. For example, nobody put the Karen flag down in front of the KNU liaison office. I think it is because of a lack of communication between the Karen and Burmese.

Anything else to say?

I want to tell you people from Brigade 5 [Hpapun District] who carried illegal logging and crossed our village when transporting logs. Despite that, they did not donate money to our village. They live in Brigade 5 and come to sell logs in our area. If they enter our village, they should let us know about it. They should donate some funds to our village.

I want to request some funds from them. The funds would go to our community. They carry out logging and they cross our village, but they do not care about our village. When the leaders heard about the illegal logging they asked me about it. I did not know what to tell them because I do not know much about the loggers. I feel useless even though I am the responsible person in my village.

Another thing I want to talk about is the black market cow trade. It also comes from Brigade 5. They people from Brigade 5 came with their cows and buffaloes and keep them in our village. Their cows and buffaloes had diseased legs because they walked a long way. The diseases spread to our cows and buffaloes.

Do you know which village those people are from?

They were probably from Day Pu Noh village and other villages.

Anything else?

Our villagers like to go hunting. However, I do not want my villagers to go hunting near or around Tatmadaw army camp. On the other hand, Tatmadaw allows people to use .22 long rifle to go hunting with. Some outsiders are carrying guns openly when they go hunting. It is fine to carry guns openly if they are soldiers. However, even though they look like Tatmadaw and KNU soldiers - they are not. Therefore, I worry that there may be a conflict between the KNU and Tatmadaw in our village. Some civilians are wearing soldier uniforms and are carrying guns. If Tatmadaw sees it, it may cause a conflict. If the conflict occurs, it will not only affect the villagers, it will also affect our leaders. Therefore, we do not allow people to large guns, but it is ok if they use .22 long rifles.

Some people are not afraid of anything. They make friends with the Tatmadaw soldiers and they go hunting together. They also hunt nearby Tatmadaw army camp. I do not want these kinds of things to happen.

OK. Thank you very much.

Yes. Thank you too.

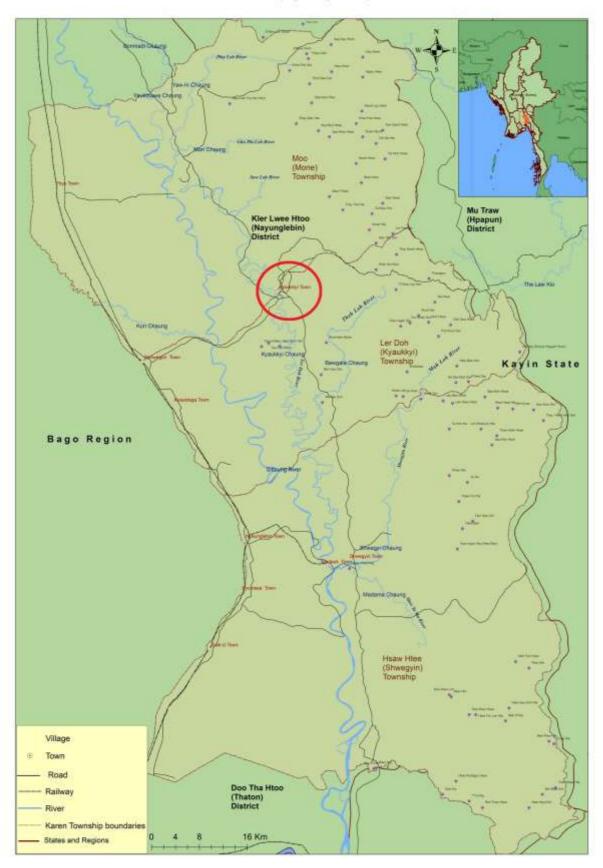


This photo was taken on December 5th 2016 in Gb---village, Ken Doe village tract, Ler Doh Township, Dooplaya District. This photo shows the interviewee who expresses about villagers' concern on the road construction carried out by the Tatmadaw. Villagers fear that the road construction will also increase potential investments of companies such as stone mining and logging. [Photo: KHRG]

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

- "Nyaunglebin Short Update: Mone Township, November 2016 to February 2018" (July 2018)
- "Nyaunglebin Interview: Saw A---, May 2017", (December 2017)
- "Nyaunglebin Field Report: Militarisation, land confiscation, violent abuse, 're-relocated' IDPs, landmines, and development projects, December 2015 to December 2016", (October 2017)
- "Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Kyaukkyi Township, January to May 2017", (October 2017)

Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)