



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

November 28, 2016 / KHRG #16-29-A1-I1

Toungoo Interview: Saw A---, December 2015

This Interview with Saw A--- describes events occurring in Htantabin Township, Toungoo District, during December 2015. It covers taxation and education.

- A villager from B--- village reported that the Karen National Union (KNU) taxed each motorbike owner 5000 kyat [US \$3.81] and 35000 kyat [US \$26.73] from each carrier. They also taxed the villagers who work on the cardamom plantations 1000 kyat [US \$1.30] per viss of cardamom.
 - The villagers in Htantabin Township requested the KNU to give a clear picture of the KNU taxation policy.
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Interview | Saw A---, (male, 52), B--- village, Htantabin Township, Toungoo District (December 2015)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Toungoo District on December 16th 2015 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 Toungoo District, including four other interviews and nine video clips.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Plantation

Position: Village head

Uncle, what is your name?

My name is Saw A---.

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.

How old are you?

I am 52 years old.

Where do you live?

I live in B--- village.

What about the district?

Taw Oo [Taungoo] District.

What about the township?

Htaw T'Htoo [Htantabin] Township.

What do you do?

I work on a plantation.

What kind of plantation?

Cardamom plantation.

What is your ethnicity?

Karen.

What is your religion?

Christian.

Are you Baptist or Anglican Christian?

Baptist Christian.

Do you have a family?

Yes.

How many children do you have?

I have six children.

What is the age of your eldest child?

The age of my eldest child is 20 years old.

What is the age of your youngest child?

The age of my youngest child is 9 years old.

After the [2012 preliminary] ceasefire [agreement]³ was signed, have any human rights abuses happened in your village?

[I think] it was not human rights abuse but they took [taxes] too much. If I say they violated [human rights] they did not violently commit it. Many villagers were likely talking about it [the taxations]. After the ceasefire was signed, most villagers said that sometimes taxation and demands were required [to be met]. They said that at the present time the situation is getting better but we still have to pay [taxes], [serve as] porters, and [do] forced labour.

Which group [demanded the taxes]?

It happened in my village.

I meant are they KNU [Karen National Union] or Burma/Myanmar government [who committed human rights abuse]?

They are from the KNU.

What did they demand the villagers do, and what problems did the villagers face?

The problems were about taxation. They [villagers] were mainly complaining about it.

Do they demand it every year, or change the structure of taxation?

We have to pay them every year. We have to pay cardamom and motorbike [taxes to] them. The KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] also demanded money from us. They [villagers] mainly complained about cardamom and motorbike taxations. They [villagers] always talk to the village heads to bring up this issue whenever they [village heads] go to a meeting along with [KNU] top leaders. They taxed it in two levels. They firstly demanded it at the village level, then at the checkpoint level.

How much did they demand per motorbike and per viss of cardamom?

They demanded 500 kyat (US \$0.38) for one viss of cardamom, and it will be 1,000 (US \$0.77) kyat per viss of cardamom because they demanded it at two different levels.⁴

So is it [500 kyat] (US \$0.38) covered only at the village level?

Yes and another level is at the checkpoints.

How much did they demand at the checkpoints?

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. In March 2015, the seventh round of the negotiations for a national ceasefire between the Burma/Myanmar government and various ethnic armed actors began in Yangon, see ["Seventh Round of Nationwide Ceasefire Negotiations," Karen National Union Headquarters](#), March 18th 2015. Following the negotiations, the KNU held a central standing committee emergency, see ["KNU: Emergency Meeting Called To Discuss Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement And Ethnic Leaders' Summit," Karen News](#), April 22nd 2015.

⁴ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 28th November 2016 official market rate of 1309 kyat to US \$1.

They demanded 500 kyat (US \$0.38).

How much did they tax each motorbike?

In the village level they taxed 5,000 kyat (US \$3.87) per motorbike. At the checkpoints they taxed 30,000 kyat (US \$23.25) [from transport carriers] and a total of 35,000 kyat (US \$27.13) from each carrier.

Is it 5,000 kyat (US \$3.87) to get a motorbike license?

Yes, it seems [to me] like [it was for a] motorbike license.

What about 30,000 kyat (US \$23.25) [for what did you pay 30,000 kyat (US \$23.25)]?

They asked for 30,000 kyat (US \$23.25) from [transport] carriers and they said that they were transporting the goods.

How much did they tax from [transport] carriers?

They asked for 30,000 kyat (US \$23.25) from [each] carrier. I am not sure [if it was] 30,000 kyat or 35,000 kyat (US \$23.25 or US \$27.13). They created their own decision letter [taxation policy].

Did they ask [the tax] only in your village?

No they taxed it in every village.

Who created the [taxation policy]?

The central [KNU] developed it.

What do villagers think about the [KNU] taxation? Is it [collected] in the right way or not?

It is [collected] in the right way because in the past when we went to meet with the [KNU] top leaders they told us that the taxation was not happening in one area [KNU controlled areas]. It was taxed around the world, even in developing countries. They have their own troops and governors but they collected the taxes. We [village head] explained it to the villagers but it was not clear for them. They [the KNU] said that if there is to be more peace you [villagers] will have to pay more taxes. We explained this to them [the villagers] but the villagers do not clearly understand. So, we would like the top leaders to explain it [taxation policy] to the villagers.

Have district leaders or department leaders ever come to talk about them [the KNU's taxation policy]?

No, they have never come. Mostly the KWO [Karen Women Organisation] come here.

Did any villagers submit this case?

No, we never [submitted or] discussed it in the meetings.

Were there any other problems? Such as rape, oppression, and/or killing since the [2012] ceasefire was signed?

Since the ceasefire was signed abuses have not happened, but in the past they happened a lot. If the villagers committed abuse we sent them to the KNU [district] and they were punished and rebuked, but after they returned to the village they committed the same mistake and used alcohol. So [the village leader] was [held responsible for] everything that happened. They [villagers] might say that we were not good leaders and could not even control the villagers. Because of that, the villagers committed the mistakes [and crimes].

This is how the villagers thought?

Yes, they blamed the village head.

Regarding taxation, the villagers are not clear about it, so you want the top leaders to explain everything to them?

Yes. The villagers think that at the present time, it is a ceasefire period and peace process, therefore they want to live freely. They do not want to do anything [pay tax]. They also thought that [the ceasefire would be] an opportunity to receive some rights.

Do you have any problems related to education?

Regarding education, a KED [Karen Education Department] member, Saw C---, lives here and he was selected as a KED member in summer. But none of them [KED members] did their work.

Do you face any problems regarding education or healthcare in your village?

Yes.

**Are there any children in your village not able to be supported by their parents to study?
Are there enough teachers to teach in the school?**

Yes, some parents are not able to support their children because of many other problems [that they are] facing. Most teachers are [Burma/Myanmar] government teachers and if they want to teach, they teach and if they do not want to teach, they do not.

How many teachers are teaching in the school?

Many teachers are teaching in the school. There will be around four to five [KNU] government teachers.

How many Burmese [Burma/Myanmar government] teachers are teaching in the school?

Only one [Burma/Myanmar government teacher] is teaching in the school; the rest of them are government [KNU] teachers.

What about the school headmaster?

Yes, it has a school headmaster. The headmaster was selected in the village.

How many students are there in the school?

You should check with the school teachers about the numbers of the students.

Is it middle school or primary school?

It is not middle school. It is primary school.

What about the healthcare; is there a clinic in your village?

No clinic. Sometimes they [Burma/Myanmar government health workers] conduct health awareness related to malaria. They [village health workers] said that if the villagers are feeling sick, *'please come to us and we will treat them'*. In reality, even though you get sick and go to them, they do not have enough medicine [to treat patients].

What are the most [common] sicknesses facing the villagers in your village?

They mostly face stroke disease and one to two of them already had surgery.

If they are sick where do you send them?

We send them to the hospital in Taw Oo Town.

You send the [patients] to Taw Oo Town?

Yes. The health workers selected by Burma/Myanmar government do not treat patients well and do not do good work. They also have no medicine to treat patients. They sometimes come to distribute medicine and just finish their duty and go back [to their own places]. Some of them even did not reach the village and went back [on the way].

Which group were they from?

They were from Burma/Myanmar government.

Are there any NGOs [non-governmental organisations] that have come to conduct development projects in your village?

Yes. I know about KORD [Karen Office of Relief and Development], which came to install water for us for [about] one year ago.

Is there any other organisation?

No.

Only that organisation?

Yes.

Which month [did they start the project]?

I do not remember. It was newly finished just in summer season only.

Did they complete their project?

Yes they did.

How did they implement the project?

They stored water in the water storage and supplied it to the villagers. I asked some villagers and they said that some of them received water [supply] and some did not. Therefore, it caused arguments among the villagers. Now, it has not yet reached summer season, and when it reaches summer season there might be more arguments happening among them.

Did they select any people to be in charge of managing water?

They formed a water committee but they did not do their jobs well. Currently the people transport new pipes. In our village there are three sections. They are section one, section two, and section three but they only set up water storage in two of them [sections]. The villagers reported this issue [to the KORD] and they promised to set up the new water storage. Luckily one of the old water storages was set up by Burma/Myanmar [government] there and they decided to use that old one.

Can you access water in summer?

In the summer the water situation is not so good, but if we store them overnight we can save some water.

How many households are there in your village?

There are [censored for security] households in the village, but in the household registration list it was recorded as only [censored for security] households. When the people come to distribute the rations we counted all villagers who live in the village or outside of the village. If they come to distribute some [aid] things they count it as only [censored for security] households, or sometimes [censored for security] households. Some villagers do not collect enough food.

How many villagers are there in the village?

When we distributed mosquito nets we registered them and there are [censored for security] villagers. We checked the number of them when we distributed mosquito nets.

[Censored for security] people?

Yes.

Are there any army camps based near your village?

Yes. An army camp is based in our village, in the upper part of the church. It has been based there a long time [many years].

Do they disturb the villagers?

Since the ceasefire was signed the situation with them is improving. In the past it was not like that, but now I think it will be more related to the villagers because they stay [in their army camp] and villagers ask them [Tatmadaw] to visit them and buy food or drink for them. At the present time they do not come out at night time in the village. We talked with the administrator to inform villagers that you are allowed to make a relationship with them [Tatmdaw] but you should keep it limited. Even though the ceasefire was signed they should follow their [Tatmadaw's] rules of law. Sometimes they come to stay in the village until 11:00 pm and if something happens everyone turns to the leader head [village head].

Do you want to add anything more?

No.

Thank you.

Yes, thank you.

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

- “Toungoo Interview: Saw A---, October 2016,” (November 2016)
- “Toungoo Interview: Ma A---, April 2016,” (October 2016)
- “Hidden Strengths, Hidden Struggles: Women’s testimonies from southeast Myanmar” (August 2016)
- “Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi and Htantabin townships, July to September 2015,” (July 2016)
- “Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi Township, March to July 2015,” (March 2016)

Taw Oo (Toungoo) District



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