



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

October 21, 2016 / KHRG #16-38-A2-I2

Toungoo Interview: Ma A---, April 2016

This Interview with Ma A--- describes events occurring in Htantabin Township, Toungoo District, during April 2016, covering drug selling and the Tatmadaw cutting down bamboo trees in villagers' plantations.

- *The Tatmadaw and local authority leaders from the Burma/Myanmar government cooperated to sell drugs in B--- village.*
 - *The Tatmadaw based in Kler La Army Camp cut down villagers' bamboo trees at C--- village without asking the owners.*
 - *In 2014 TYT Company agreed to install electricity for villagers who live close to Kler Army Camp but some of the villagers still do not have access to electricity even though they paid the company.*
 - *In February 2015, Na Ta La, [Ministry for Progress of Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs] received 50 million kyat (US \$39,325.16) from Burma/Myanmar parliament to install a water supply for the villagers but they are still unable to access water.*
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Interview | Ma A---, (Female), B--- village, Htantabin Township, Toungoo District (April 2016)

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 April 23rd 2016 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 two other interviews and six video clips.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Unknown

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Farmer

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.

Position: Villager

What is your name?

My name is Ma³ A---

How old are you?

I am [censored for security].

Where do you live?

I live in B--- village.

What do you do for a living?

I work on an agricultural plantation.

Do you face any problems related to working on the plantation?

Yes, if the weather is too hot the plants dry up.

Are there any [recreational] drug [issues] coming [happening] here?

Yes, recently some drugs were confiscated. They [drugs] were being dealt by the [Tatmadaw] intelligence and the Tatmadaw who are based in Kler La army camp. I do not know which month they were confiscated in. I only know that they were confiscated on the road.

What is the name of the [Tatmadaw] intelligence?

Soe Naing and [the other dealer] is a [Tatmadaw] rationing official, and [they cooperate with] a villager. They join hands to collaborate with each other.

Do any teenagers use drugs?

Yes, but we do not see them using drugs with our own eyes.

Do you think these drug issues can have any consequences [for your community]?

Yes.

How?

In our village, there are many different ethnic groups who come to live here. Especially in terms of administration, the administrators come to live here and sell drugs to earn a living.

Which government are they from? Are they from the Burma/Myanmar government?

Yes, they are from the Burma/Myanmar government. They [the Burma/Myanmar government] placed administrators to live in B--- [village] and they sell drugs when they live here. They collaborated with the Tatmadaw [to sell drugs] and they sell alcohol as well. They organised and told the Tatmadaw to bring drugs with them when they come to the army camps. They sent some drugs to the villagers and kept some of them in the camps. They also kept some with the [Tatmadaw camp] department officers.

³ Ma is a Burmese female title used before a person's name.

Who is the department officer?

The department officer is Kyi Kaing and he regularly sells drugs.

How long has he been selling drugs [here] for?

He has been selling drugs for many years now.

When did he start selling drugs [here]?

He started selling drugs after he came to be based here, when [the Burma/Myanmar government] set up their administration [in this area]. They have been operating here for more than ten years.

Have there been any development projects taking place here?

No.

I meant development projects related to road construction, clinics or education?

Yes, some schools were being repaired and water [pipeline projects have taken place].

When did they start installing the water [pipes]?

They started installing the water [pipes] in February [2015].

Which NGOs are they?

They are not NGOs groups. They are Na Ta La [from the Burma/Myanmar government].⁴

Have they finished the project?

No, the people who applied for a water supply in B--- village, some of them now have access to a water supply. The people there who applied for electricity, they [some of them] can access electricity but many of them cannot access [electricity].

Was the project by a company or an armed actor?

The project was by a company.

What is the company's name?

I did not note down the name of the company.

Is it TYT Company?⁵

Yes, they installed electricity for the villagers.

When did they start installing the electricity [supply]?

⁴ Na Ta La is a Burmese language word which refers to the Burma/Myanmar government's Ministry for Progress of Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs.

⁵ The KHRG community member stated this as TYT although KHRG cannot confirm the accuracy of this description.

They started two years ago [in 2014] and connected the electricity for the village heads' [houses] in February [2016]. They explained to the village heads that if people wanted to access electricity, they would have to submit their names to the village head to notify how many of them would like to access electricity. The people submitted their names [to their village heads]. The administrators said they would require a fair price [for the connection fee] but they did not ask for a fair price, as they had promised [but instead they asked for a higher fee than they had promised].

Who were they?

They were the group of people who installed the electricity supply. Some villagers had to pay [an initial connection of] 300,000 [kyat] [US \$235.95]⁶ and some had to pay 400,000 [kyat] [US \$314.60] and others had to pay 500,000 [US \$393.25] to 600,000 kyat [US \$471.90] for the electricity. When they were installing the electricity in the village, it was quite far from the main road; therefore they asked villagers to install lamp posts by themselves. They only installed the lamp posts for villagers along the main road. Currently we do not have access to electricity yet. We are not sure whether we will be able to access it in February [2017] or not. They are currently installing an electricity connection to connect it with the electricity [transformer].

Do you know the people who are working to install the electricity supply?

No.

So they reported to the [Burma/Myanmar national] parliament that they had already installed water for the villagers?

Yes.

Did they also say the electricity had been successfully installed?

Yes they did, but in reality it has not been installed and we still cannot access electricity. I heard they got a budget of 50 million kyat [US \$39,325.16] from the parliament. They did not let us know how much they had spent installing the electricity supply. After the villagers collaborated and worked with them, we heard that it cost 30 million kyat [US \$23,595.10] but they [the government officials] did not tell us about this. So we have not received a water or electricity supply. Before they came to install the water supply, they did not do any research about whether it would be good [suitable] to install water or not [in this area]. We had experienced this [these problems] once before when Administrator U That Win held a governing role here and he set up lots of water storage units and he did not let the villagers know how much it cost. Later the villagers could not access water but he did not let the villagers know [the reasons why there were problems]. Now they have started installing electricity again from 2015 to 2016.

Have there been any development projects taking place related to road construction?

No, the villagers repair the roads by themselves. We can travel by motorbike now that the road has been repaired.

Do you face any problems related to water?

Yes we do. As we live in B--- village, we have to collect water beside D--- road. If we want to install a water supply ourselves, we have to buy a water pump to collect the water. We usually face water shortages in summer [dry] season.

⁶ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the October 7th 2016 official market rate of 1,271.45 kyat to US \$1.

You said the group who installed the water supply had said that the water supply had been installed but you still cannot access the water?

Yes, they had said that [the water had already been installed] but we cannot access the water. We had experienced this once before when U That Win was the administrator here.

U That Win?

Yes.

Did he used to be an administrator [here]?

Yes, he was an administrator here.

Where did he live [when he was here]?

I do not know because he resigned as an administrator many years ago. When he was an administrator he had said that he would construct roads. He did construct roads with mud but the newspapers said that concrete roads had been constructed here in B--- [village]. In reality he only constructed dirt roads here. The water supply has also not been installed.

Do the Tatmadaw soldiers still travel around in the village?

Yes.

Do they also go out from their army camp?

Yes, they go out from their army camp to cut down trees and bamboo.

Did they cut down people's bamboo?

Yes, they cut down trees and bamboo from people's [plantations]. They went to cut them at C--- village.

Did they ask [for permission from] the owners?

No, they cut them down without the owners' permission.

Have they repaired [expanded] their army camp?

No, they only built two buildings in the village. One building was built at the start of the village and the other building was built in the upper part of the village.

As the [Tatmadaw] army camp is based in your village, do you have any concerns?

Yes.

How?

Sometimes they collect the fruit from people's plantations.

Do they bring guns with them when they travel around?

Yes, if the people invite them to celebrations or school activities in the village, they bring guns with them even when they are just coming to have food in the village. If their leaders come here they also carry guns with them.

Do you have any other concerns?

No.

Do you think it will be good if they move away from the village?

If they move away from our village, it will be very good for us. We are really concerned about them [Tatmadaw] selling drugs [in our area].

When did they start selling drugs?

They started [selling drugs] last year and people found out about it when they confiscated them [the drugs].

You said that they [Tatmadaw] collaborated together with the [Burma/Myanmar government] administrators?

They collaborated with the administrators. They came to live here to sell alcohol and opium. When the military trucks come here, they always bring drugs with them to their camps.

Do they transport more rations now [than before]?

They transport rations once each year.

Do you want to add anything else?

I really want to talk about drugs being sold by the Tatmadaw when they are here. They sell drugs to destroy the communities. They take it as an opportunity [to make money and harm the communities] and they collaborate to sell drugs. When the military trucks come, they always bring drugs with them when they are transporting rations. They do not allow the villagers to sell drugs but they sell drugs themselves. It is a big concern for us.

Are there any consequences in families after they [communities] use alcohol [or drugs]?

Yes, many young people have used drugs. They use them until their lives are destroyed and they do not know how to work. Some people who have a family do not work to raise their family or look after their children [after they start using drugs].

Have there been any rape cases here?

No, many groups of ethnic people live here and most girls here get married with the Tatmadaw soldiers. These girls are really proud of the Tatmadaw soldiers and they have good relationships with the soldiers.

Do they [Tatmadaw] build [good] relationships with the villagers?

Yes.

How do they build relationships?

They have parties and sing karaoke songs for the whole night until early in the morning. When their leaders come they have a party and drink strong drinks.

Do you think it is a good thing to do?

I don't think it's a good thing to do.

Why is it not good?

It is not good to drink and sing all night because it can affect a village's dignity. If they do not drink too much then it does not matter. It is not good to drink and sing all night in the village.

Do they have parties like that in the village regularly?

In the past they did not do things like that. If one of them moved away from the camp they had a party for them in the village and they would sing songs together. They would sing for the whole night in the village.

Thank you.

Yes, thank you.

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

- "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)
- "Toungoo Field Report: December 2013 to December 2014," (February 2016)
- "The 2015 Elections and Beyond: Perspectives from villagers in rural southeast Burma/Myanmar," (February 2016)

Taw Oo (Toungoo) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)