



Karen Human Rights Group
Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

July 25, 2018 / KHRG #18-9-A1-I1

Doolaya Interview: Saw J---, January 2018

This Interview with the village tract head Saw J--- describes events that occurred in Win Yay Township, Doolaya District, during the month of January 2018. It includes information about abuse of power by a Karen National Liberation Army soldier, instances of forced labour, problems regarding a reserved forest, and development projects.

- *In January 2018, a Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) Officer Poe Chit punished villagers who were farming on land demarcated as a reserved forest. He ordered them to log wood for him without any compensation. In this case, Officer Poe Chit used his position of authority to punish local community members in a way that benefitted him economically.*
 - *K--- villagers are facing livelihood challenges because the Karen National Union (KNU) Forestry Department created a reserved forest that limits villagers' use of the forest to secure their livelihoods.*
 - *A Japanese organisation provided 55 solar panels to local villagers in K--- village, Kwee K'Chaw Kyi village tract, Win Yay Township.*
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Interview | Saw J---, (male, 39), K--- village, Win Yay Township, Doolaya District (January 2018)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Doolaya District on January 18th 2018 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 Doolaya District, including two other interviews, 105 photographs and 5 video clips.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Farmer

Position: Village tract head

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.

Before we start the interview, do you have any questions about KHRG?

What can KHRG do to help us solve our problems?

We are an organisation that documents human rights abuses and villagers' concerns to make the villagers' voices heard. We do not work on specific cases or provide financial assistance to communities, but we advocate on villagers' voices to let decision makers from both domestic and international communities know the local situation so that they can take action on it.

There were many difficulties in the past during the conflict period. Many people were killed and injured in the fighting. Since the ceasefire [between the Karen National Union (KNU) and Tatmadaw] was signed [in 2012], our [KNU] leaders live close to us [unlike in the past]. We believe that when our leaders take any decision, they should let us villagers know and have a proper conversation with us.

Recently, the [Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)] Officer Poe Chit came to stay in the K--- area. Officer Poe Chit's soldier drank alcohol heavily and was unable to return to his accommodation alone. He asked local villagers to accompany him to his accommodation. The villagers who accompanied him were also a little drunk. Together, they mistakenly took Officer Poe Chit's chicken.

Afterwards, the [soldier and the villagers] cooked the chicken in the village. Some community members ate the chicken with them. However, when Officer Poe Chit heard [that his chicken was stolen] he punished all villagers who ate his chicken. He asked all of them to clean the bushes on his farm as punishment, regardless of the amount of chicken the people ate.

What is your name?

People in my village mostly call me Saw M---. My official name is Saw J---.

How old are you?

I am 39 years old.

Where do you live?

I live in K--- village.

Which village tract, township and district do you live in?

My village is located in Kwee K'Chaw Kyi village tract, Waw Ray (Win Yin) Township, Dooplaya District.

What is your religion?

I am Buddhist.

Are you married?

Yes, I am.

How many children do you have?

I have seven children.

How old is your youngest child?

My youngest child is four months old.

What kind of responsibility do you take in your community?

I am a village tract head.

What is your occupation?

I work on a plantation.

Can you please share your experience of being a village tract leader?

We [Karen people] have village tracts and our own administration. In regards to our administration, I would like to recommend to the [KNU or KNLA authorities] to consult and talk with villagers first before they take any action.

As I told you earlier, a [KNLA] soldier was drunk and needed my villagers' assistance [to return home]. My villagers made the mistake unintentionally taking his chicken, but they were punished unfairly.

[Officer Poe Chit is also involved in a dispute regarding land and compensation that has occurred in the village.] In the past, the former village tract leader, Maung Tha Pay, sold land [unofficially]. The first time he sold land, he consulted with villagers beforehand about the areas that he planned to sell, and villagers agreed with him. However, he sold land a second time without consulting with the local community. He did it secretly. When the community discovered what he did, people took action against him. They seized 200,000 kyats [\$148.60 US] and let him keep the remaining 100,000 kyats [\$74.30 US]³ that he received from selling the lands.

Maung Tha Pay reported this case to Officer Poe Chit, who took action immediately. Officer Poe Chit said that we villagers bullied Maung Tha Pay. He ordered us to return the money that we took from Maung Tha Pay, so we returned the 200,000 kyats [\$148.60 US] to him. In fact, we had already spent that money to install lights in the school. We had already bought batteries and solar panels with that money. When we received the order from Officer Poe Chit, we started to organise the villagers to collect money to pay back Maung Tha Pay.

We thought it was inappropriate for him to report this case because the whole village tract agreed to take this money from him because he made a mistake in selling the land without consulting anyone.

Did anyone report this case to [the KNU] Township [Office]?

Nobody reported this case to the Township Office. When this happened, Officer Poe Chit held a meeting with the villagers but I did not attend the meeting. [I heard] from my aunt Naw L---[who attended the meeting] that he threatened villagers. He also threatened my aunt during this meeting. He said, "Hey aunty! I want to see you walk like a disabled person one day."

When he threatened her, how many villagers were around your aunt? Why did he threaten her?

³ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the May 14, 2017 official market rate of 1,346 kyats to US \$1.

He threatened her because she said something related to the disputed land case and the 200,000 kyats [\$148.60 US] that were seized from Maung Tha Pay. We villagers agreed to keep the money and use it for our community. [Her remark was seen as controversial because Officer Poe Chit is involved in a land dispute with the local community].

When the villagers' response to the land dispute was reported [to Officer Poe Chit], he took action against the villagers. Villagers told Officer Poe Chit what the former village tract leader had done, but he did not listen to them.

You said that the [KNU] came and stayed near the village. How many of them stayed there? Why did they stay there? Did they come and stay because it is their duty?

As far as I know, they came here because they were assigned by their leaders to stay here.

Who assigned them to be on duty here?

[KNU] office manager Saw P'Leh placed them here.

Is office manager Saw P'Leh from the administration [KNU] or military [KNLA]?

I am not sure. I guess he is from the KNU administration. Officer Poe Chit is under Saw P'Leh's control.

Is he KNU or KNLA?

Officer Poe Chit is from the KNLA.

Do you know why he was stationed here?

The last time we met with office manager Saw P'Leh, he said that he had placed Officer Poe Chit in K--- village for duty on purpose. He said that K--- village has precious resources, so the Officer was assigned to protect them.

What are the good things that Officer Poe Chit has done for the community?

I have not seen him do any good things for our community. But, whenever he needs help, we always help him.

Does he ask villagers to work for him? What has he asked villagers to do? Do the villagers receive payment?

He does not pay villagers but he does offer food to villagers who work for him. Recently, villagers took two to three days to log wood for him. Villagers rotated to do the work in turns.

Who did villagers log the wood for? When did it happen?

It happened between January 15 and January 17 2018. In the past, local villagers used to help him like this. When he built a barrack, they helped him with construction. Our weakness is that we do not have records of these incidents because we do not usually write any records.

How many households are in your village?

There are 62 houses.

How many villagers are in this village?

There are over 300 people in this village. I have a record of the exact number but I forgot it.

What kinds of challenges do you see in the relationship between villagers and you, or villagers and KNLA soldiers, or villagers and the Tatmadaw?

I do not see any challenges.

So, what are the challenges in this village? What are the issues and problems in this village?

For me, personally, I do not have any problems. However, there is a problem with the KNLA Officer Poe Chit. He told Saw Hteet Poe [a local villager] that there are still two people in this village, me and my fellow villager, that he has not done anything to.

To answer your question about challenges, we are facing livelihood challenges. The land that we use for farming is now limited. This is because the KNU has demarcated the farming lands that our community depends on as a reserved forest. Villagers are finding it difficult to access land in order to farm. The [KNU] Forestry Department told the local community that the area from this hill to the side of the main road would become farming lands for villagers. They told us about this two to three years ago, but their words have not yet become reality.

The last time that I went to meet with [the KNU Forestry Department] about this, they told me to wait for permission [for villagers to work on this land]. However, now it is the right time [of the year] for villagers to work on the land. If we keep waiting, when are we going to be able to farm? If we do not farm, where can we get food?

This is very challenging [because our community relies on subsistence agriculture]. I am worried for my villagers' livelihoods. The [Forestry Department] told me "Don't you have any other land to work on?"

I want to know, which part of the reserved forest are villagers allowed to farm? And, when was the forest reserved? Who is the leader of the [KNU] Forestry Department?

The forest has been reserved for a long time [but it was not enforced]. I cannot remember which year. [The KNU Forestry Department] started prohibiting access to the forest in 2016, narrowing the available land for villagers to farm on.

Did they come and measure the land?

Yes. We asked the KNU Forestry Department, "Why do you come and measure the land?" They responded that land next to the road will become available for villagers to farm on.

What is the name of the leader of the Forestry Department?

His name is Myint Soe.

Do you know what his specific position is?

No.

Did local villagers report this issue to the [KNU] Township authorities?

The local community has not reported this issue anyone yet. We have a plan to report it to [the relevant KNU authorities].

Do the Township authorities know about what is happening with the reserved forest?

I think the [KNU] Township authorities will not know about what is happening if we do not report the issue to them. I am not sure whether the Forestry Department has already reported this issue to Township authorities.

How many widowed families are in this village?

There are seven widowed families in this village.

What do they do for a living?

In this village, we do not have any other work opportunities other than farming, logging, and producing charcoal. We do not have the option to seek other jobs, such as working for a company.

Since villagers' farmlands were restricted because the forest was reserved, what do you think future livelihood difficulties will be?

Because of this situation, the villagers lost their farmland. To try to solve this issue, villagers requested to work on land beside the main road, but the [Forestry Department] did not permit villagers to do this. This has created a problem for our villagers. Consequently, it is not easy for them to have access to food.

Can you tell me what are the differences in your community before the 2012 ceasefire agreement and after the ceasefire agreement?

It has not made a huge difference. People from other villages now come to work here. As more people from other villages arrive, employment opportunities for our villagers have decreased. Before the ceasefire, many villagers were working on land in the reserved forest. After the ceasefire, [the Forestry Department] started taking action against villagers who farmed on the reserved forest.

When authorities take action against the villagers, who decides the case? Is it a judge who decides the case or the village head?

The case is neither decided by a judge or village head. Because Officer Poe Chit is on duty in this area, he has been assigned to oversee the reserved forest as well. So, Officer Poe Chit is the one who takes action against villagers. As a punishment, he asked the villagers to clean and fence his plantation land, which is located in Waw Ray Hkee area.

Who owns this plantation?

As far as I know, Officer Poe Chit owns this plantation.

What were villagers asked to do?

The last time that I talked to a villager [who was punished by Officer Poe Chit], he said that he had to work on the cashew plantation.

How long was he punished for?

He was punished [and made to work in the plantation] for two months.

Did he work there fully for two months?

No. [In the end,] he only worked there for slightly over a month. It depends, some people worked on the cashew plantation for a month and some for less than a month.

How many people were punished [for working on reserved forest lands]?

I think 13 people. But, there were only 12 of them who went [to work on the plantation]. Later on, I found out that the villagers had to work on the Paw Hkoh Kyaw [tropical tree] plantation [as punishment].

Did KNU authorities take action against [Officer Poe Chit] because of this? Did villagers report about this to the KNU authorities? If the villagers did, how did they go about reporting him?

I have not seen the KNU authorities take any action against Officer Poe Chit. As far as I know, his plantation land was later seized.

Who seized his land?

Sergeant Cha Hpgaw, the Forestry Department and the Agriculture Department cooperated and seized [Officer Poe Chit's] land. The location of Officer Poe Chit's plantation is in Waw Raw Hkee area, which is not near our village.

Are there any health problems in your village? What kinds of diseases do villagers suffer from?

We have malaria in our village. The rate of malaria infections has increased. A healthcare group who works on malaria prevention came to our village and worked here. However, it is not clear to me that this group has [been effective in decreasing malaria], because [villagers have reported] an increase of malaria cases compared to past years.

So, where do villagers go if they suffer from malaria and other sicknesses?

If malaria cannot be cured here [in the village], we obtain an approved reference letter from a health worker and go to the Three Pagoda Pass civil hospital. [A local organisation] pays for transportation fees for the patients.

What kinds of businesses do villagers run in your village?

We do not have any other businesses besides plantation work. People here mostly work on rubber plantations. However, the price of rubber is low. Betel nut has a good price. However, most of the villagers' betel nut plantations are located on land that has been demarcated as a reserved forest. If the Forestry Department decreases the area of the reserved forest, villagers will be able to use some of the remaining land as their betel nut plantations. Since the Forestry Department has promised to decrease the area of the reserved forest, villagers often come to me and ask about it. Villagers hope to gain permission to work on the land, the sooner the better.

What is the price of rubber?

One viss [1.633 kgs] of rubber is 450 kyats [\$0.33 US].

What about betel nut? Is it sold dry or fresh?

People sell it fresh.

How much per one betel nut?

One betel nut is 23 kyats [\$.02 US].

Are many people working on betel nut plantations?

There are not so many people are working on betel nut plantations in this village.

Has K--- village received support from any NGOs?

We had an organisation that came to distribute solar panels.

What is the name of the organisation?

The people who distributed solar panels were local people from this township, but the people who financially supported the solar panels were from Japan.⁴

Has everyone received solar panels?

Not every household has received panels because when we gave the list of houses in the village to the organisation, some houses had not yet been built in the village.

So, how many solar panels were distributed in this village?

55 solar panels were distributed.

Did the distributors tell you anything regarding the solar panels?

No, they said nothing. Some villagers started families and built new houses so I hope they will also receive solar panels later.

Have there been any military activities related to forced labour and travel restrictions?

During my tenure as village tract leader, I have not seen any military activities. Before I was a village tract leader, I saw an event that happened in 2017. I cannot remember the date and the month. They [Tatmadaw] came to reconstruct a damaged bridge. They requested me to find a machine and wood to rebuild the bridge.

Did they pay you for the expenses of the materials that they asked you to find?

They asked me to find the materials without paying me any money so I did not do what they asked of me.

At the time, did they tell you anything when you refused them?

At the time, they did not ask me to find good wood. Instead, they asked me to find scrap wood. So, I asked villagers to find scrap wood for them. They covered the floor of the bridge with it.

⁴ This villager is likely referring to the Nippon Foundation. [The Nippon Foundation](#) is a Japanese NGO currently implementing social innovation and development projects in Burma/Myanmar. KHRG commonly receives updates from community members on The Nippon Foundation's recent activities in Karen State, see more at "[Nyaunglebin Field Report: Militarisation, land confiscation, violent abuse, 're-relocated' IDPs, landmines, and development projects, December 2015 to December 2016](#)," October 2017, KHRG, and "[Hpa-an Field Report: Continued difficulties under ceasefire, January to December 2015](#)," October 2016, KHRG.

There might be some information that I left out in my questions. So, is there anything that you want to add?

Regarding schools, do we have to recognise the school as a KNU school permanently? Or, should it be recognised as a Burma/Myanmar school? In the past, KNU teachers received 7,500 kyat as a salary [\$5.57 US]. Now, they only receive 4500 kyat [\$3.34 US]. Teachers spend most of their time teaching but they receive less financial support now. They also have [to support] their families. So, I think it is not fair to them. If these teachers are not able to teach these students anymore, it will affect our children's education. So, we want the school to become a Burma/Myanmar government school and we want the government to support the school. We want our children to study well.

How many students and teachers are in this school?

There are 73 students in the school this year.

How many standards⁵ does the school have?

The school goes up to Standard Five.

How many teachers does the school have?

There are two female teachers and one male teacher.

Have the teachers ever reported their problems to you? What are the issues and problems with the students?

Some students have problems travelling because their homes are far away. We also have problems with teachers because as our school is a self-funded school. [The local community] has to hire teachers by ourselves. So, sometimes, students' parents face financial problems.

How do you hire teachers? Can you please describe it a bit more?

Each house has to provide four baskets of rice for the teachers. [1 basket is equivalent to 25 kilograms]

Because parents have to provide four baskets of rice to the teachers, are some children unable to continue their education because their parents cannot meet this requirement? Are there any children who want to go to school but cannot?

There are some children who want to go to school and some parents who do not send their children to school. There are also some children who cannot go to school because their parents cannot afford it. Some parents come to negotiate with us and we help them send their children to school. We have a school committee to address this issue. We help them with expenses related to school materials and transportation. We let them study at our school even if they cannot afford to pay the school fees.

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

I think that is all that I have to say.

⁵ A standard refers to a school year in the education system of Burma/Myanmar. The basic education system has a 5-4-2 structure. Primary school runs from Standard 1 to Standard 5, lower secondary school is Standard 6 to Standard 9, and upper secondary school is Standard 10 to Standard 11.

Thank you so much for your time.

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

- “Dooplaya Situation Update: Kyainseikgyi and Kyonedoe townships, November to December 2017,” (May 2018)
- “Dooplaya Situation Update: Win Yay Township and Kyainseikgyi Township, September and October 2017.” (April 2018)
- “Dooplaya Incident Report: Forced labour ordered by Tatmadaw officer in Win Yay Township”, (October 2017)
- “Dooplaya Situation Update: Kyainseikgyi Township, February to May 2017,” (September 2017)
- “Dooplaya Interview: Saw A---, September 2016,” (May 2017)

Dooطلا District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)