



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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Tenasserim Interview: Saw C---, Received in May 2011

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted prior to Burma's November 2010 elections in Te Naw Th'ri Township, Tenasserim Division by a villager trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The villager interviewed Saw C---, a 30-year-old married hill field farmer who told KHRG that he was appointed to the position of village head by his local VPDC in an area of Te Naw Th'ri Township that is frequently accessed by Tatmadaw troops, and in which there is no KNLA presence. Saw C--- described human rights abuses faced by residents of his village, including: demands for forced labour; theft and looting of villagers' property; and movement restrictions that prevent villagers from accessing agricultural workplaces. He also cited an incident in which a villager was shot and killed by Tatmadaw soldiers while fishing in a nearby river, and his death subsequently concealed; and recounted abuses he witnessed when forced to porter military rations and accompany Tatmadaw soldiers during foot patrols, including the theft and looting of villagers' property and the rape of a 50-year-old woman. Saw C--- told KHRG that villagers protect themselves in the following ways: collecting flowers from the jungle to sell in local markets in order to supplement incomes, failing to comply with orders to report to a Tatmadaw camp, and using traditional herbal remedies due to difficulties accessing healthcare. He noted, however, that these strategies can be limited, for example by threats of violence against civilians by Tatmadaw soldiers or scarcity of plants commonly used in herbal remedies.

Interview | Saw C--- (male, 30), L--- village, Te Naw Th'ri Township, Tenasserim Division (Received in May 2011)¹

The following interview was conducted by a villager in Tenasserim Division who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. It is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.² This interview was received along with other information from Tenasserim Division, including 21 other interviews.³

¹ KHRG cannot confirm the exact date on which this interview was conducted; however, based on content of this interview and other information submitted by this villager in May 2011, it was likely conducted between July and October 2010.

² KHRG trains villagers in eastern Burma 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, villagers 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.

³ When these documents have been processed and translated by KHRG and when sufficient information has been compiled and analysed, a full Field Report on the situation in Tenasserim Division will be available on the KHRG website. Until then, KHRG's most recent analysis of the situation in Tenasserim Division can be found in the recent Field Report, "Militarization, Development and Displacement: Conditions for villagers in southern Tenasserim Division," KHRG, March 2011.

Ethnicity: Karen
Religion: Christian
Marital Status: Married
Occupation: Hill field farmer
Position: Village head

How many children do you have?

I have three children.

How old is your oldest child?

My oldest child is 13 years old.

How is your youngest child?

My youngest [child] is six years old.

How long have you fulfilled the village head's responsibilities?

I've fulfilled the village head's responsibilities for three years.

Who elected you to be village head?

I didn't want to be village head, but no one looks after my villagers, so the enemy SPDC⁴ appointed me to be village head.

What is [the title of] your position?

My position is VPDC [Village Peace and Development Council] village head.

How many households do you have in your village?

I have [*number censored for security*] households in my village.

How many villagers do you have in your village?

There are [*number censored for security*] villagers in my village.

What are the villagers' occupations?

The villagers work on their plantations, hill fields and do work for daily wages.

Do the villagers have enough food?

No, the villagers don't have enough food because the food [they have] isn't enough for the year.

⁴ In Karen, the Burmese phrases *Na Wa Ta* (SLORC) and *Na Ah Pa* (SPDC) are commonly used to refer to the Burmese government or to Burma's state army, the Tatmadaw. Many older Karen villagers who were accustomed to using the phrase *Na Wa Ta* (SLORC) before 1997 continue to use that phrase, even though the SLORC has not officially existed since 1997. Similarly, despite the official dissolution of the SPDC in March 2011, many Karen villagers continue to use the phrase *Na Ah Pa* (SPDC) to refer to the Burmese government or to the Tatmadaw; see: "Mission Accomplished as SPDC 'dissolved'," Myanmar Times, April 4-10 2011. The term *Na Ah Pa* was used by the interviewer and interviewee, and "SPDC" is therefore retained in the translation of this interview.

What do the villagers do when they don't have enough food?

They take odd jobs, and when they get the money they go and buy one or two milk tins of rice (0.195 – 0.39 kg. / 0.43 – 0.86 lb.) for each day.

Do the villagers have any income?

The villagers make an income by searching for flowers in the jungle [to sell in the market] and going and taking odd jobs. These are the villagers' sources of income.

How long has your village been set up?

Before my village was named Gkay but in 1997 the enemy [Tatmadaw] forced the villagers to move to the L--- relocation site.

Is it close to G--- Road?

Yes it is close to G--- Road.

Does your village face any problems?

My village faces many different problems.

What is the problem?

The problem is we don't have a chance to go and work outside the village because the enemy [Tatmadaw] doesn't allow us to go and work on our plantations and hill fields. We can work only [in places] near our village and this is why we can't get enough food for the villagers.

Do the SPDC Army [Tatmadaw] soldiers ever enter your village?

Yes, the SPDC Army soldiers always come and go, but not the same battalions. They're different battalions. One troop goes and another troop comes.

Do they base their army camp in your village?

No, they don't base the army camp in our village, but they come and live in villagers' houses.

What do they do when they enter the village?

They loot the villagers' livestock. The villagers' [mature] livestock is no longer ever in the village because they [the Tatmadaw soldiers] loot the villagers' animals every time they come.

Do they harass the villagers?

Within the past few months, they haven't harassed the villagers, but they always threaten the villagers.

Why do they do that?

Because when they summon villagers to come see them, if the villagers don't go, they get angry and intimidate the villagers.

Do they pay any money when they loot the livestock?

Since they started to loot things in the village, I've experienced only one time that they paid for one pig. This was a very big pig, but they gave only 5,000 kyat (US \$6.90)⁵ to the owner. They looted a lot of things and livestock belonging to the villagers, so maybe they took pity on the owner [of the pig] and paid him 5,000 kyat.

Have the SPDC Army soldiers killed any villagers?

Recently they haven't killed any villagers, but in 2009 they killed one of the villagers.

Why did they kill him? Could you tell us?

This villager went fishing and the SPDC Army soldiers were stationed silently on sentry duty and they heard noise coming from the river, and when they saw him they thought this man was their enemy [a soldier from the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)] and they shot him. In our village, as this person had disappeared, we went and looked for him. We tried to investigate this villager's disappearance, but the SPDC Battalion Commander who was living in our village, he didn't tell us anything. They left him in the river and tied him to a rock [to weigh down the body]. We, the villagers, went and looked for him. When we looked for him we saw a bag, and in the bag I saw his fishing permit. So we found out about his death and the SPDC Army soldiers couldn't keep it secret any more. They told us that they mistook this villager for a KNLA soldier and that they'd shot and killed him.

How did they tell you?

They said they mistook him for a KNLA soldier so they shot and killed him.

Did he have a family?

Yes, he had a family.

What was his name?

His name was U M---.

How many children did he have?

He had two children.

Did the SPDC Army help his family?

SPDC Army soldiers came and visited his family once and gave them 10,000 kyat (US \$13.79) and two sacks of rice (96 kg. / 211.2 lb.).

Do you have to porter?

Yes, I can't avoid portering for the SPDC Army.

Do they pay you when you porter for them?

They never pay us.

Do they give you food?

⁵ All conversion estimates for the Kyat in this interview are based on the fluctuating informal exchange rate rather than the government's official fixed rate of 6.5 kyat to US \$1. As of September 6th 2011, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 725 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

The rice that they feed the villagers with is bad rice that they've boiled and kept for two or three days.

When you've gone to porter, have the SPDC Army troops ever entered any villages?

From my village we went to the army camp called S--- and the SPDC Army entered T--- and K-- villages.

What did they do when they entered K--- village?

They went to a villager's small shop and looted the cigarettes and snacks and such [things].

What did the village head [of K--- village] do after they looted the things from the villager's shop?

The Tatmadaw soldiers ordered the village head to pay for them and clear everything up for them.

Did the SPDC soldiers rape any women?

Yes, they raped one of the women. Before we went to K--- village, they entered W--- village and raped a woman.

How old was she?

She was over fifty years old.

Do you know her name?

Yes, her name is *Mu Ghar* [Aunt] P---.

Did they abuse any of the other villagers?

The SPDC Army soldiers came and abused villagers, looting, forcing villages to porter rations, and threatening the villagers in many different ways. They [villagers] have to pay money for permission to exit their villages, and that restricts movement too.

Do you have school in your village?

Yes, we have a school in my village.

How many grades does it have?

It only has four grades.

Who set up the school?

The school was set up by the SPDC government.

How many teachers does it have?

There are two teachers.

Who sent [hired] the teachers?

The SPDC Army paid for them to come.

How much does the SPDC government have to pay for the teachers?

The school principal earns 25,000 kyat (US \$34.48) per month.

Do the villagers have to give anything for teachers?

The SPDC Army soldiers ordered the villagers to give the school teachers one big tin of rice (16 kg. / 35.2 lb.), one viss of salt (1.6 kg / 3.52 lbs), one viss of shrimp paste and 10,000 kyat (US \$13.79) per month, per teacher.

How many students do they have in the school?

They have over 40 students.

Do the students have to pay a school [tuition] fee?

Yes, they have to pay a school [tuition] fee.

Who do they have pay the school fee to?

They have to pay it to the school principal.

Do the students have the chance to learn without disruption?

The number of students has decreased a lot. They had over 40 students before, but now there are only 20 or 30 students left.

Do you know why the number of students has decreased?

Some of the students' parents have health problems. I'm not sure, but maybe the teachers aren't good at teaching or nice to the students and so students are leaving.

Do they allow Karen language to be taught?

For teaching the Karen language, no one dares to mention this. If we do, I will get hurt a lot by the SPDC Army soldiers. I know they will hurt me.

Do the students get any support [for school supplies]?

No, the students have to buy everything by themselves.

Do you have a clinic in your village?

There's no clinic in my village.

Where do you get medicine when you get sick?

When we get sick we have to collect herbal roots, trees and bamboo that cure the diseases. Because we always use and collect the herbal roots, trees and bamboo, now we can't find them any more. Some villagers, they take the herbal medicine and, if it makes them get better, they get better, but if not, they will die. That's all.

Do the villagers have the chance to work without disruption?

No, they don't have chance to work without disruption.

How much does one big tin of rice (16 kg. / 35.2 lb.) cost?

One sack of rice costs 30,000 kyat (US \$41.38) and one sack contains three big tins of rice.

How much does one viss of meat cost?

One viss of meat costs 2,500 kyat (US \$3.45).

Does the SPDC Army develop anything for the village?

No, I've never experienced the SPDC Army develop anything in my village. The SPDC Army soldiers come to the village and only destroy things and demand things from the villagers.

What do you think about the KNU [Karen National Union]?

We see only good things from the KNU.

Does the KNU Army [KNLA] ever come to your village?

No, they never enter my village.

Why don't you contact them?

To contact them is hard for me because the SPDC Army soldiers threaten us a lot so I don't dare to contact them.

Do you want to mention anything about the questions above?

The last thing I want to mention is only that the SPDC Army soldiers harass the villagers.

What have you had to do for the SPDC Army for the 2010 election?

When they entered the village, they ordered me to provide the number [amount] and names of villagers eligible to vote.

Do the villagers have to go to vote?

No, the villagers don't have to go.

Do you want to vote?

I don't want to vote because this is the SPDC government's plan.

Did you take the villagers' name list on your own or did the SPDC Army soldiers force you?

I didn't want to make the villagers' name list, but the SPDC Army soldiers threatened me and forced me to collect the villagers' names.

Has the SPDC government told you about the 2010 election?

No, they didn't tell us about anything before they actually came to the village. Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) politicians, Tatmadaw Commanders and Captains, mostly they've come to my village and told me to collect the number [amount] and names of villagers eligible to vote. They came and asked me what the villagers need and I told them that in my village we need to repair the school. We informed them about the school.

Has the KPP (Karen Peoples Party) party come to your village?

Of the KPP, only Saw Khin Maung Shwe has come to my village. He said he's Karen and that the Karen people have to organise ourselves. I know he's Burmese, he just came and said he wanted to organise the Karen people and lied about himself to the villagers.

Which villagers did he organise [to vote for the KPP]?

He came and organised the religious villagers, using the pastor's house and the teachers' houses. He drew close only to religious people.

Has the USDP guaranteed villagers anything if the villagers vote for them?

Yes, when USDP representatives came to my village, they asked me what the villagers needed and asked me to inform them. But we haven't got any of the things we informed them that we need.

Have you heard if the USDP has helped any villages?

No, I have no experience [knowledge] of any villages they support.

Have you heard if they'll help the villagers?

No, I've never heard that they'll help the villagers in any of the villages.

Do you have anything to mention about the last set of questions about the election?

In my experience with the election, if it happens, I don't think the villagers will obtain freedom and independence. The SPDC government has said that if we help them with our vote, we'll get freedom in our country [Burma]. Like the news reports from other countries [say], I think if this election happens, the SPDC government will make their army forces stronger and stronger. We, the civilians, will face a lot of problems if they do.

Do you think the SPDC government will make the country free?

I don't think they'll free the country because the SPDC government's plan would never give us freedom. We've never experienced that they do good things for civilians, so it isn't good to agree with their election plan.

Further background on the military situation in Tenasserim Division can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- *Militarization, Development and Displacement: Conditions for villagers in southern Tenasserim Division* (March 2011)
- *Living conditions for displaced villagers and ongoing abuses in Tenasserim Division* (October 2009)
- *A strategy of subjugation: The situation in Ler Mu Lah Township, Tenasserim Division* (December 2001)

- *Freefire zones in southern Tenasserim* (August 1997)
- *Tenasserim Division: Forced Relocation and Forced Labour* (February 1997)
- *Relocations in the gas pipeline area* (April 1997)
- *Effects of the gas pipeline project* (May 1996)

