



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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Toungoo Interview: Saw F---, October 2011

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted during October 2011 in Than Daung Township, Toungoo District by a villager trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The villager interviewed Saw F---, a 55-year-old resident of W--- village who fled his village and hid in the forest during a joint attack by soldiers from Tatmadaw Infantry Battalion (IB) #92 and Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #603. According to Saw F---, on October 12th 2011, following a clash with Karen National Liberation (KNLA) soldiers at a location 45 minutes on foot from W---, Tatmadaw soldiers fired approximately 50 mortar rounds into W--- and nearby civilian areas and then entered W---, where soldiers fired small arms deliberately at villagers' houses, the Roman Catholic church and religious and cultural items; killed villagers' animals; and looted or damaged villagers' property including food stores, clothing, roofing materials and money. Saw F--- also reported that W--- villagers have had to provide forced labour delivering bamboo poles to Tatmadaw camps on multiple occasions in the past year; that the W--- school has been forced to close twice due to Tatmadaw accusations that villagers are communicating with non-state armed groups; and that villagers face obstacles in accessing healthcare due to their distance from the nearest health facility and the cost of travel. A full account of the attack on W---, including photo documentation and excerpts of this interview, is available in the bulletin "Tatmadaw soldiers shell village, attack church and civilian property in Toungoo District," published by KHRG on November 25th 2011.

Interview | Saw F--- (male, 55), W--- village, Than Daung Township, Toungoo District (November 2011)

The following interview was conducted by a villager in Toungoo District 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.¹ This interview was received along with other information from Toungoo District, including three incident reports, seven other interviews, three situation updates and 204 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Gkebar Karen
Religion: Roman Catholic
Marital Status: Married
Occupation: Farmer

¹ 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.

² 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 Toungoo District will be available on the KHRG website. Until then, KHRG's most recent analysis of the situation in Toungoo District can be found in the recent Field Report, "Attacks on cardamom plantations, detention and forced labour in Toungoo District," KHRG, May 2010.

How many children do you have?

I have five children.

How old is the oldest one?

The oldest one is 30 years old.

How old is the youngest one?

The youngest one is 24 years old.

What is your responsibility in your village?

As I am a *[position censored for security]*, I have to *[activities censored for security]*.

How many households do you have in your village?

There are 20 households in my village.

What do the villagers do for their livelihoods in your village?

After the water irrigation system was set up, the villagers have been working on agriculture.

Do the villagers have enough food in this village?

The villagers have many kinds of food problems. Each day they have to work for daily wages. Because there are many different kinds of problems happening in a year, villagers never have enough food.

Do other villages also face food problems, or is it only your village?

It's not only my village. The other villages also face food problems like us.

Can you tell us the names of the other villages?

They're: Kler Mu Kee, Hoh Thaw Ploh, Tha Ba Rah, K'Leh Pa Loh, Meh Taw Preh, Nga Loh Daw Gka, Pa Yah, Gk'Ta Say, Maw Kee, P'Yay Kah, Ta Boh Sih, Gk'Ma Gkay Poh Lee, Ma Yaw Poh Lee, Ler Mu Kyoh, Plah Du Kaw, Say Kah Thaw, Yoh Kan Klo, Ma Sa Koh, Ya Meh Poh Lee, Thay Bpa Kyoh and T'Gkaw Htih.

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

They have to struggle in many ways to have food for each day and they have to go look for work in other villages.

Do the villagers work as porters for daily wages?

No, they don't do that.

Where does the village get income?

The income the village gets comes from the cardamom fields.

How long has your village been set up?

The village was set up a very long ago.

Do you experience any problems in your village?

We don't experience any problems and we can work smoothly.

What problems do you face?

I don't face any problems.

Does the SPDC [Tatmadaw]³ enter your village?

Yes, they do very often.

When do they enter?

Sometimes they come into the village, but sometimes they just come [patrol] around the village and then go.

What did they do the last time they entered your village?

When they entered the village, they did many different kinds of things. They took the villagers' clothes, killed villagers' chickens and pigs, and destroyed the church. They took money, gold necklaces and, moreover, they broke the cooking pots and took villagers' sandals. They took anything that looked new or good.

Did you note down the day they came and destroyed things?

The last time they came, I noted it.

Could you tell us the date and what else they did?

I'll tell you as much as I can. On October 12th 2011 at 6:20 am, the SPDC LIB [Light Infantry Battalion] #603 and IB [Infantry Battalion] #20⁴ combined together and entered W--- village. They destroyed the statues of Mary and the church. The things the SPDC took are as follows:

1. Saw B---: one box of things and 500,000 kyat (US \$649).⁵
2. Saw W---: 16 bags of cardamom and 400,000 kyat (US \$519).
3. Saw D---: 50 pieces of zinc [roof panelling] and 600,000 kyat (US \$779).

³ 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.

⁴ This interview was conducted in S'Gkaw Karen with a third-party interpreter translating questions into Gkebar Karen. While the interpreter translated the Infantry Battalion number as '20', two villagers other villagers trained by KHRG who submitted documentation of the October 12th attack on W--- indicated that LIB #603 and IB #92 were the Tatmadaw units that carried out the attack.

⁵ All conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report 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 November 21st 2011, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 770 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

4. Saw R---: 40 viss (64 kg. / 140.8 lb.)⁶ of cardamom seed and 400,000 kyat.
5. Naw N---: six bags of [ardamom pods and 100,000 kyat (US \$130).
6. Saw M---: five pairs of clothes and 200,000 kyat (US \$260).
7. Saw F---: two bags of cardamom pods and 100,000 kyat.
8. Naw Na---: 10 pairs of clothes and one bag of rice.
9. Saw Ht---: 25 viss (40 kg. / 88 lb.) of cardamom seed and 200,000 kyat.
10. Saw Dt---: two muskets and 25 viss of cardamom seed.
11. Saw Th---: one musket, 5 viss (8 kg. / 17.6 lb.) of cardamom and 50,000 kyat (US \$64.94).
12. Saw A---: one musket.
13. Naw Hs---: 200,000 kyat.
14. Naw T---: 200,000 kyat, two large clay jars, one box and 50 pieces of zinc [roof panelling], six cubits (nine feet / 2.74 m)⁷ long.
15. Saw G---: 15 pieces of zinc [roof panelling] and 100,000 kyat.
16. Saw Pa---: 50 viss (80 kg. / 176 lb.) of cardamom.
17. Saw K---: one house destroyed, two bags of rice and one musket.
18. Three goats of [belonging to] W--- youth [organisation].
19. Killed one pig [belonging to the W--- Church], destroyed the church pictures, one clock and a Mother Mary statue.
20. Saw He---: 500,000 kyat
21. W--- village youth group's television, inverter and speaker

Did they enter the village or did they shoot from outside?

They entered the village during the night. They don't travel in the daytime. They only go [patrol] outside the village during the night time. The SPDC entered the area at about 4:00 am or 5:00 am and they arrived near W--- village at about 6:15 am. They met with soldiers from the KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] and they started to fight outside the village. The SPDC soldiers who fought with the KNLA soldiers were from the same troops that entered the village. The other troops shelled mortars from the mountain peak.

What kind of mortar rounds did they use when they shelled the village?

I don't know what kind of mortar rounds they shelled into my village. When I heard the sound of mortar shelling, I ran away.

How many mortar rounds did they fire into the village?

They shelled about 50 mortar rounds, I guess.

Did any villagers get injured?

When the SPDC fired the mortars, all the villagers ran away, so no one got injured.

When they fired the mortars, did they [mortar rounds] fall on the villagers' houses?

The mortars fell on houses and many were damaged.

How many mortar rounds fell on villagers' houses?

There were four or five mortar rounds which fell on villagers' houses.

⁶ A viss is a unit of weight equivalent to 1.6 kg. / 3.52 lb.

⁷ A standard measurement of the length of bamboo poles commonly referred to in Karen as the length from one's finger tips to one's elbow, about 18 inches / 45.7 cm.

When the SPDC soldiers entered the village, did they shoot at the houses?

When they entered the village, they shot at every house.

You said the fighting was outside the village, so did soldiers on both sides [KNLA and Tatmadaw] suffer injuries?

Yes, but the SPDC soldiers had the most injured.

Did they arrest the villagers to be guides?

I don't know whether they arrested villagers or not, but when they came, they started to fight during the night.

Why did they destroy the village? Did they suspect the villagers had contact with the KNLA?

It's because the SPDC suspected our villagers had contact with the KNLA that they came to my village.

Why did they destroy the villagers' place of worship if they suspected the villagers were contacting the KNLA?

They not only suspected our villagers [had contact with the KNLA], they also wanted to kill our villagers. Because they didn't kill any villagers, they destroyed our place of worship and our cultural items in the village. Moreover, they broke the statue of Mary into three pieces and shot all over the pictures on the wall.

Have you heard anything about the SPDC killing villagers?

When they entered the village, they didn't kill any villagers. In the past, they've come and met with KNLA soldiers and fought. Because of that, until now, they've been unhappy with the villagers.

Does the SPDC recognise this village as a black, shoot-on-sight area⁸ or an SPDC-controlled area?

They recognise this area as a black, shoot-on-sight area.

Did the SPDC soldiers stay in the village or go ahead after they destroyed the church and other things in the village?

They came and rampaged in the village and destroyed things and after that, about 30 minutes later, they left.

⁸ Tatmadaw insider Maung Aung Myoe explains that Tatmadaw counter-insurgency doctrine views territory as black, brown or white according to the extent of non-state armed group (NSAG) activity. He explains that "black area" denotes "an area controlled by insurgents but where the Tatmadaw operates;"; "brown area" denotes "a Tatmadaw-controlled area where insurgents operate;"; while a "white area" is territory which has been "cleared" of NSAG activity. See: Maung Aung Myoe, *Neither Friend Nor Foe: Myanmar's Relations with Thailand since 1988*, Singapore: Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies Nanyang Technological University, 2002, p.71. The use of the term "shoot-on-sight" by the interviewer and interviewee, meanwhile, alludes to Tatmadaw practices employed in the most difficult to control "black" areas which treat civilians, villages, food supplies and essential civilian property as legitimate military targets, in violation of international humanitarian law (IHL). For a comprehensive explanation of these practices, and analysis of relevant norms of IHL, see: *Self-protection under strain: Targeting of civilians and local responses in northern Karen State*, KHRG, August 2010, pp.22-46, 101-108.

Does this SPDC unit have a fixed army camp base or are they *loht shah a'pweh* [an active mobile patrol troop]?

As I'm only a villager, I don't know where those soldiers come from. I don't know which SOC [Strategic Operations Command] controls them.

Does the SPDC order forced labour from your village?

Yes, sometimes we have to do forced labour. We have to bring them bamboo poles and carry rations.

Have you had to do forced labour in 2011?

Yes, the villagers have done forced labour. They've cut bamboo poles and carried rations in 2011.

Was it only your village that had to do forced labour?

All the villages had to do it in this area.

How many people did they ask to do forced labour?

From each household, one person had to go.

Do you remember the date?

I didn't note it down because it's happened so many times, I haven't had time to note it all down.

Which army camp did you have to carry bamboo to?

I brought bamboo poles to Htee Tha Saw army camp.

Do you know the LIB #603 commander's name, as you mentioned that unit above?

I don't know the officer's name.

Do you have a school in your village?

My village is big, but we don't have a school. We have to rely on ourselves.

How many students are there?

There are 20 students.

Where do you get the school supplies?

The students buy school supplies in the shop.

Does the SPDC disturb the school?

They did disturb us twice and, because of this, the students can't study smoothly [without disruption].

Why did they come and disturb the class?

The SPDC said: *“Why did you build the school by yourself? It’s illegal to do so without the approval of Burmese public authorities. It’s because you were in contact with the KNLA, that’s why you could build the school by yourself illegally.”*

Do you have a clinic in your village?

The villagers have many different kinds of diseases, but there’s no clinic within easy reach. If we look at the situation, [Than Daung] Town is very far from here.⁹ We have many health problems.

Where do the villagers go when they get very sick?

Even if a sickness is serious, what can we do? If we look in one direction, the clinic is far, and the other way, the clinic is also far. So we just keep the patients in their houses. If they have a long life, they can still live, but if they have a short life, it finishes there. The second thing is that we also need a lot of money to go to the clinic.

What are the common diseases in this area?

In this area, the common disease is malaria. If the weather’s changing [when the seasons change], there’s dengue fever, runny noses and a lot of flu.

Have the villagers had the chance to work smoothly within recent months?

When the SPDC is active in the village, we can’t work smoothly, but when they leave, we can work well. Each year, there’s never enough food for the villagers because the rats destroy the rice.

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

We have to go [outside W--- village to buy rice] and come back the same day. One big tin is 8,000 kyat or 10,000 kyat (US \$10.39 or 12.99). There are many different kinds of rice and different prices of rice.

How much does one viss (1.6 kg. / 3.52 lb.) of meat cost?

All different meats are 1,000 kyat (US \$1.30) for one viss.

Where do you buy food?

I go to buy food in He---.

On the way between your village and He---, are there any SPDC checkpoints?

I have to pass the Htee Tha Saw army camp.

Do you have to get a travel permission document?

Sometimes we have to get one if the [security] situation isn’t good, but if the situation is good, we can go and don’t need to get the document.

⁹ According to one of the villagers trained by KHRG who documented the attack on W---, the village is 24 km as the crow flies from Than Daung Gyi Town. Saw F--- did not elaborate on why this distance is “very far”, however in Toungoo District the mountainous terrain and frequent travel restrictions, particularly along vehicle roads, may present particular challenges to travel for local villagers.

How much is one travel permission document?

For one travel permission document, we have to pay 500 kyat (US \$0.65).

Does the SPDC come and develop anything in your village?

From my perspective, I've absolutely never seen them come and develop anything in the village.

How badly does the SPDC treat the villagers?

They came and destroyed our things. And they killed the Tha Ba Rah village chairperson. They cut down the bamboo that shielded the village and took the muskets and they destroyed things, the same as they've done before. The SPDC soldiers rampage in many villages.

What was the name [of the Tha Bah Rah village chairperson]?

His name was Saw C---.

Which year was that [when he was killed]?

He was killed in 2008.

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

We cooperate with them and, as we do, we see nothing bad thing in them.

Do you have anything to mention about anything we haven't asked you?

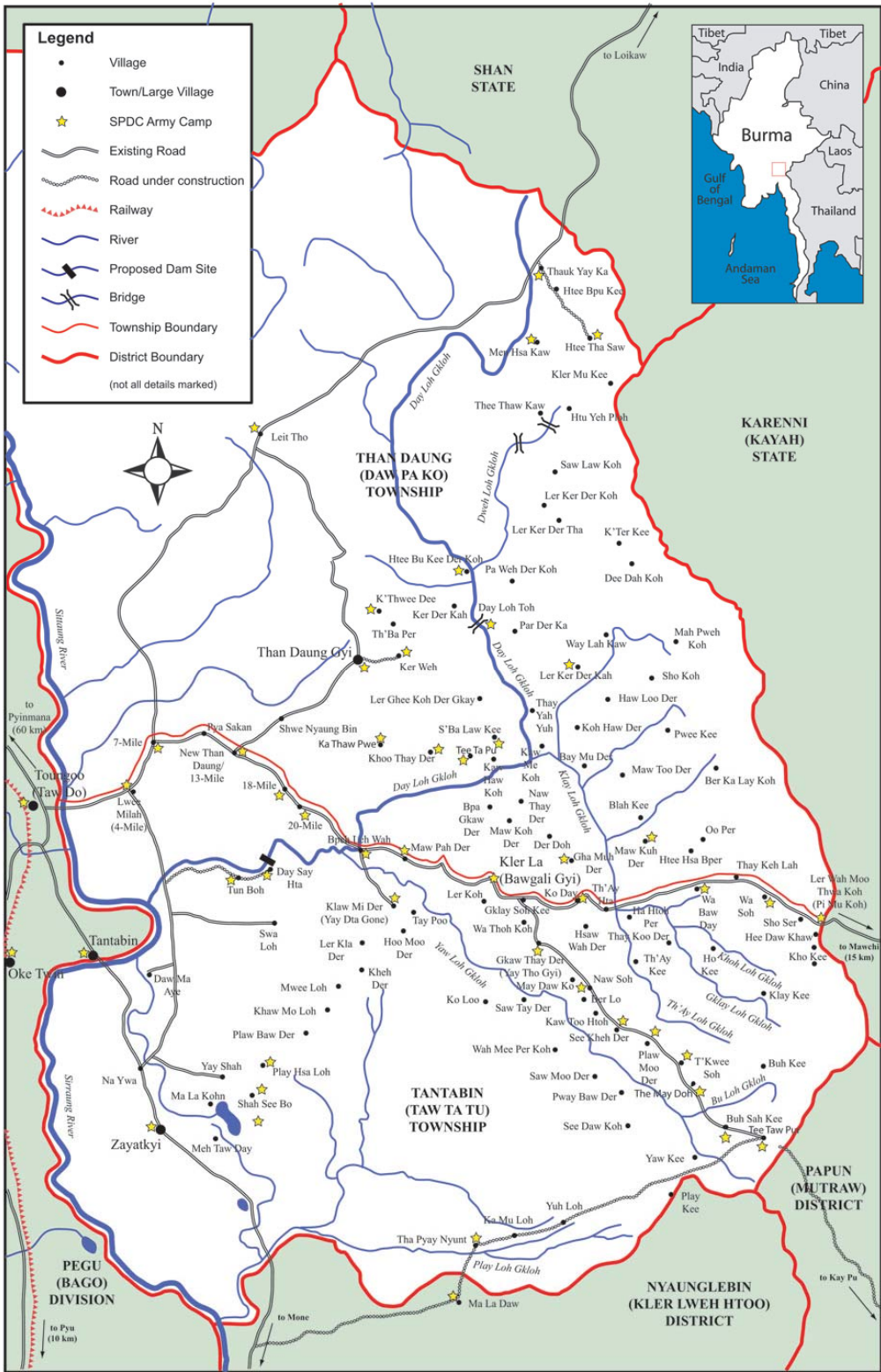
Based on your questions, I want to request some things of you, but I'm so *ah na* [shy] about the problems and the things I need. The Tatmadaw came and destroyed things in my village and, moreover, they took our money from the last cardamom seed harvest. They also took our livestock and killed the chickens and destroyed the houses. If we look back, when we worked in our hill farms, there were many rats that destroyed the paddy. Therefore, the pigs, buffalos and the paddy plants were all not growing well. Now the villagers face malnutrition because they don't have enough food. They face health problems if they need to go to the public hospital because it's far away and also the *Kaw Thoo Lei* [KNU] clinic is far away. We can't go to either of these two places. If I report a list of problems like the alphabet, it goes from *Ka Gyi* [the first letter of the Burmese alphabet] to the end of the alphabet. There are a lot of problems we see. We need education, health care and food. If I have to say it to you straight, we need many things.

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

- "Tatmadaw soldiers shell village, attack church and civilian property in Toungoo District," (November 2011)
- "Toungoo Situation Update: May to July 2011," (October 2011)
- "Toungoo Situation Update: April to July 2011," (October 2011)
- "Toungoo Interviews: March and April 2011," (July 2011)
- "Toungoo Situation Update: April 2011," (June 2011)
- "Toungoo Interviews: March and April 2011," (June 2011)
- "Toungoo Interviews: November 2010 to April 2011," (June 2011)

Recent photos from the area are presented in *KHRG Photo Gallery 2010* and *KHRG Photo Gallery 2010-B*. These and other KHRG reports and maps of the region can be found on the KHRG web site at <http://www.khrq.org>.

Toungoo (Taw Oo) District



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