



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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Toungoo Interview: Saw D---, September 2011

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted during September 2011 by a villager trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The villager interviewed Saw D---, a 37-year-old village head and betelnut farmer, who described serious abuses committed by soldiers in Than Daung Township under the command of MOC #9 during 2011, including an incident in which soldiers fired at and killed a 48-year-old villager while he was making charcoal and a separate incident in which two villagers were killed while being forced to guide Tatmadaw troops, when the soldiers came under fire from a non-state armed group. Saw D--- also described repeated demands for forced labour by soldiers from Tatmadaw LIB #378, under MOC #9, including one incident in which more than 100 villagers were forced to carry military rations for a month. Saw D--- also chose to highlight instances of past abuse including: arbitrary arrest, detention and violent abuse of religious leaders; theft and looting of villagers' livestock, food, and personal belongings; and the harassment of female villagers. Saw D--- noted that villagers counter limited access to and cost of healthcare treatment at government facilities by using traditional cures in their own village and also respond to food insecurity by sharing food and pursuing alternative means of supporting their livelihoods with jobs for daily wages.

Interview | Saw D--- (male, 37), W--- village, Than Daung Township, Toungoo District (September 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, one situation update and 204 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Betelnut plantation

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 In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in eastern Burma, 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. As companion to this, a redesigned website will be released in 2012. In the meantime, KHRG's most recently-published field information from Toungoo District can be found in the Report, "Toungoo Situation Update: July to October 2011," KHRG, November 2011.

Position: Village head

How many children do you have?

I have five children.

How old is the eldest child?

13 years old.

How about the youngest one?

The youngest one is over a year old.

For how many years have you held the position of village head?

Ten years.

As you are the village head, what responsibilities do you have?

I have to develop the village, cooperate with the villagers and with organisations from outside the village.³

Did the other villagers elect you to serve as the village head, or was it the SPDC Army [Tatmadaw]⁴ or KNLA that elected you?

The villagers elected me.

Why did the villagers elect you?

I have no idea. Maybe the reason was because they had a good feeling about me.

Could you explain to us about your experiences since you have become the village head?

I will explain to you as much as I can. Many years ago, I was facing many different kinds of problems. The SPDC Army soldiers ordered us to do forced labour. They oppressed us and they have threatened us many times. Villagers have been killed in several ways for no reason. Until now, we haven't had rights and we miss [having rights] a lot. This is because we have lived under other people's control and we have had to do whatever people order us to do. We have don't have the options to choose.

How many households are in your village?

³ The interviewee did not specify to which organisations outside the village he was referring.

⁴ In Karen, the Burmese phrases *Na Ah Pa* (SPDC) and *Na Wa Ta* (SLORC) 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 4-10th 2011. The term *Na Ah Pa* was used by the villager who conducted this interview and interviewee and "SPDC" is therefore retained in the translation of this interview.

There are over 100 households.

How many villagers are there?

There are over 600 people.

What is the most common kind of livelihood that villagers do in your village?

They mostly work on plantations.

In your village, do any villagers not get enough food from their livelihoods?

Most of the people don't get enough food to eat.

How do villagers survive when they don't get enough food to eat from their livelihoods?

They try to survive by themselves in several ways such as working jobs for daily wages or they borrow food from others and then pay back their debt when they have fruits to sell.

In this village, how much can people earn in a day by working for daily wages?

2,000 kyat (US \$2.60)⁵ a day.

Do people work as porters for daily wages?⁶

There are many people that do this.

How much do they get paid for carrying things each time?

It depends on what they carry. If you carry a lot, you can earn a lot of money. If you just carry a little, you will earn less money.

What is the highest wage people could earn for carrying ten viss (16 kg. / 35.2 lbs.)?⁷

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 January 27th 2011, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 770 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

⁶ Portering by foot constitutes an important means of transporting goods and supplies between remote villages not accessible by vehicle roads or with roads that are only navigable in the dry season and larger towns that lie along vehicle roads. See "Toungoo Situation Update: May to July 2011," KHRG, October 2011; "Toungoo Situation Update: April 2011," KHRG, June 2011. It is probable that the interviewee is here referring to villagers who work as porters and earn a daily wage, with which they attempt to support themselves and their families. The practice of working for daily wages is commonly referred to in Karen as 'ma ta nee, aw ta nee' which translates directly as 'work one day, eat one day', highlighting the precarious food security situation faced by villagers who work for daily wages. Note that this type of portering is different to a situation when villagers are arrested or when a village is ordered to supply a certain number of villagers, who are then ordered to serve as unpaid porters, transporting military equipment and supplies, often in landmine-contaminated areas and in the face of explicit threats of violence. See for example "Papun Interview: Maung Y---, February 2011," KHRG, September 2011; "Toungoo Interviews: March and April 2011," KHRG, June 2011. For examples of an explicit threat of violence for failure to comply with a forced labour order and an explicit demand for porters, see Orders #175 and #180 respectively in *Civilian and Military order documents: March 2008 to July 2011*, KHRG, October 2011.

⁷ A viss is a unit of weight equivalent to 1.6 kg. / 3.52 lb.

People would get paid 100 baht (US \$3) for carrying ten viss.

In your village, what time of year do people get the most income?

During the harvest season for cardamom and coffee plants.

How long has your village been established?

The village was built over 300 years ago. We moved the village slightly to the east, above where the old village was located more than 73 years ago.

Does your village currently face any problems?

Of course we are facing problems. We don't get enough food from our livelihoods. Moreover, the SPDC Army is based in the same area that we are. They can order villagers to do forced labour whenever they need it.

Is the SPDC Army camp close to your village?

Yes, it is close.

Do you know their unit number?

They are LIB [Light Infantry Brigade] #378 under MOC [Military Operations Command] #9. The Battalion Commander's name is Lin Tin Oo.

Do they [the Tatmadaw soldiers] come into your village?

They don't come to the village very often. They are usually based in their camp and maintain security from there.

In the past, have they entered the village?

In the past, they entered the village again and again. They went in and out of the village every day.

Did the Tatmadaw soldiers ever catch the villagers' pigs and chickens when they entered the village?

This has happened in the past. The soldiers caught [the villagers'] chickens. In 2007, soldiers from MOC #5, led by Operations Commander Sein Thant, went to the village and took a villager's box.

What property did the soldiers take from the villagers?

They took that villager's box, their new shirts and their rice. After this happened, I reported the theft to the Tatmadaw Battalion's [commanding] officer and they paid back some of the cost but they did not pay back the full cost.

Over the past few days, have you heard of any villagers have been killed by SPDC soldiers?

Within this year?

Yes.

I have heard that two or three villagers from another village have been killed.

Which village [were they from]?

One was from P--- village, his name was Saw U---, and he was 48 years old. The Burmese soldiers arrived, and they shot and killed him whilst he was making charcoal. They [the Tatmadaw soldiers] buried him straight away.

Which Army [unit] did this? Do you know their unit number?

It was soldiers from MOC #9.

Do you know the number of the LIB and LID [Light Infantry Division]?

I don't know which LIB they were from. It was maybe LIB #426. Actually, I'm sure they weren't from LIB #426.

You don't remember who it was?

No, I don't.

Do you know the name of the officer [in charge of the soldiers]?

Their officer was Zaw Ma Too.

Have you heard about the [Tatmadaw soldiers] killing other people?

They killed two other people from K--- village. They had ordered them to be guides [for the soldiers]. They both died at the same time when fighting occurred [with soldiers from a non-state armed group].

Do you know the names of the two people that died?

Yes, I do.

Could you tell us who they were?

The first person was Saw A---.

How old was he?

He was more than thirty years old. The second person was called Saw H---.

Did these two people have any children?

They did. Both of them had children.

So did people arrange anything [give support] to their wives and children?

The people in the village helped look after their wives and children. The SPDC Army didn't give any support to them. People looked after them at the village level.

Do you know about how the incident happened?

The SPDC columns went to many different places and were active as if conducting a *myay lan* [literally 'bare land', or scorched earth] policy during their attacks.⁸ The KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army] soldiers also stayed in our area. The Tatmadaw and KNLA objected each other. When the SPDC soldiers came towards the KNLA positions, the KNLA attacked them. It was because of this that fighting often occurred during this period.

Do you know how many hours the fighting went on for?

Regarding hours, I could not tell you exactly how many hours the fighting lasted.

Since the beginning of 2011, have the SPDC Army ordered people to do forced labour for them?

Yes, they have.

Do you remember the dates?

I have forgotten the dates that the forced labour happened. They ordered people to carry rations between camps for a whole month between March and April. They did not carry the rice themselves, so the villagers had to carry it for them. It was impossible not to send the villagers [that the Tatmadaw ordered]. If we did not send any villagers, they would threaten us in many ways. We were afraid of them and so we had to do [what they demanded].

How many people did they order to go from your village?

About one hundred people had to go. Anybody that was strong enough to carry things had to carry things [for the Tatmadaw].

What kind of things did they order you to carry?

They ordered us to carry rice, milk and cans of beef, fish and chicken. We also carried sugar and fish paste.

How heavy were the loads that they made each person carry?

Two people had to carry one packet of rice [between them]. Otherwise, one person had to carry 15 cans of beef [on their own].

Where did you have to carry things from and where did you have to take them to?

⁸ In Burma, the scorched earth policy of 'pya ley pya', literally 'cut the four cuts', was a counter-insurgency strategy employed by the Tatmadaw as early as the 1950's, and officially adopted in the mid-1960's, aiming to destroy links between insurgents and sources of funding, supplies, intelligence, and recruits from local villages. See Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999 pp. 258-262. Though official references to the four cuts strategy have ceased, throughout 2011 KHRG continued to document evidence indicating that tactics targeting civilians continue to be systematically employed. See "Tatmadaw attacks destroy civilian property and displace villages in northern Papun District," KHRG, April 2011; "Joint Tatmadaw patrol burns field huts and seed stores, displace six villages in Toungoo District," KHRG, June 2011; "Tatmadaw soldiers shell village, attack church and civilian property in Toungoo District," KHRG, November 2011.

We had to carry things from our village named W--- and take them to B---. It took two hours as it was a long distance. Then we had to carry things from Thandaung Gyi Town back to W---.

When they ordered you to carry things, did they provide food for you along the way?

We had to bring our own food. They did not provide anything for us.

Are there any other [incidents of] forced labour?

Related to the fighting?

No [not necessarily related to fighting]. Have they ordered you to do any other forced labour?

We have had to do forced labour many times but I have forgotten [the dates] it happened. Ten or twenty people have had to do forced labour at a time. Sometimes, four or five people have had to do it at one time. The wives [of the Burmese soldiers] who stay behind [in their villages] send things to their husbands [when they are away]. The villagers have to go and carry these things too.

In recent years, have the SPDC Army raped any women?

Two or three years ago, Burmese soldiers touched women but they did not ruin the women's lives [by raping them].

Would you like to explain to us about the oppression inflicted by the SPDC Army?

They have oppressed villagers many times. Previously, they have arrested village leaders, some villagers, and a Christian Pastor. They detained them by restraining them in leg stocks. They arrested the Christian Pastor in the church, whilst he was on stage during the church service. By doing this they insulted our Karen people's religion.

You said that they arrested a Christian Pastor and the village leaders. Do you know their names?

I know their names. I am the village leader, the village Secretary's name is Saw C---. There were four other villagers and then the Christian Pastor *Thara*⁹ L---.

When they arrested you, how many days did they detain you in the leg stocks?

The first time I was in the stocks for three days and had to sleep there for three nights as well. The next time they arrested me I was there for two days.

Did they provide enough food for you?

No, they didn't. People from my house had to send food to me.

Why did they arrest you?

⁹ *Thara* is a Karen title applied to men that means 'teacher', but may be used to refer to any schoolteacher, religious or political leader, or any older man to whom one wishes to show respect.

They arrested us because we supported a Christian organisation. Their reason for arresting us was that we were in contact with an illegal organisation.

When you were arrested, did they hurt you by beating you?

They did beat me one or two times. Other people were beaten many more times.

Where [on the body] did they beat people when trying to hurt the prisoners?

They beat people's heads and they also kicked people backs and chests several times.

After they had beaten people's heads, did they send them to the hospital?

They did not send them [to the hospital]. The villagers just treated their injuries themselves and recovered in the village.

Are there any schools in your village?

Yes, we have a school.

How many standard [grades] does it go up to?

It goes up to seventh standard.

How many female schoolteachers are there?

There will be eight female schoolteachers here but they have not all arrived yet.

Are they government staff [paid by the government]?

Yes, they are government staff.

How much do they get paid per month?

They might get 50,000 kyat (US \$64.94) or 60,000 kyat (US \$77.92). The wage depends on their position. Some get 30,000 kyat (US \$38.96) or 40,000 (US \$51.95) kyat and some get more than 40,000 kyat and 50,000 kyat.

How many students are there [at the school]?

There are 145 students.

Does the government support the school enough with stationery such as pens?

Regarding books and stationery, the government does not support anything [financially]. In addition to this, it is our Karen school, and we live in Karen State, but we are not allowed to sing Karen songs. In the past, we sang the song of *Y' Bpwa Gk' Luh Yeh Er* ['Oh My Nationality', the Karen national anthem] but we cannot sing it anymore.

Why did they do things like that [prohibiting Karen songs]?

Maybe they have a reason. It might be because if they carried out many things like this, the Karen people will forget their Karen identity. If they are not aware of their Karen identity, the Karen people will not want to study the Karen language or Karen customs.

Do they allow people to teach Karen Language at the school?

The schoolteachers were allowed to teach Karen Language between 1940 and 1988. But Karen language has not been allowed to be taught since 1989. The Burmese Government only sends female Burmese schoolteachers to our village.

How much does a student have to pay in school fees to enroll his/her name?

They have to pay different amounts. Primary school students, those who are in standard one and two, have to pay 2.000 kyat (US \$2.60) a year. Students in standard three and four students have to pay about 4.000 kyat (US \$5.19) or 5,000 kyat (US \$6.49). Standard five and six students have to pay more than 6,000 kyat (US \$7.79).

Where do they have to pay the money to?

They have to pay it to the headmistress.

In your village, are there any students who cannot afford to go to school?

Many children cannot afford to go to school.

Do male schoolteachers and female schoolteachers make exceptions for them [so poor children can attend school]?

Yes, they do for some.

Can students from W--- village attend school properly [without disruption]?

Currently, they can attend classes quite well. However, in the past, the Burmese Government haven't sent enough female schoolteachers. They ordered some of the female schoolteachers to leave the school but they haven't replaced them [with other teachers yet]. Now there are less female schoolteachers than there were. There are only four or five female schoolteachers left at the school.

Have the SPDC Army or KNLA disturbed the school?

They haven't disturbed [the school]. However, the Education Centre took back their money and withdrew their staff. Our school is quite far away from the Education Centre and so they didn't replace the schoolteachers that left immediately. They gave money to their teachers and asked them to go to Gkleh Muh Doh instead. I have seen the withdrawal of teachers many times like this before.

Are there any clinics in your village?

There is no clinic in our village.

What do people do if villagers are sick?

We have not got a clinic but we have healthcare workers that come who are midwives. They are funded by the SPDC Army. They have the name 'health care workers' but we do not get any medication for free. Some people, if they did not have the money for the appropriate medicines, keep living like that [with their illnesses] and so some die. One person was sick for two or three months and died because they did not have any money [to buy medicine].

It seems like they do not treat people well if people do not have any money?

Yes.

What kind of diseases are the most common in your village?

Most of the diseases suffered are diarrhea and flu.

Can the people in your village currently go about their livelihoods smoothly [without difficulties]?

It is quite good if we compare it to times in the past.

When you live here, how much do you have to pay for one big tin (16 kg. / 35.2 lb.) of rice?

One sack of rice costs 25,000 kyat (US \$32.48) [there are three big tins in one sack].

How about the cost of meat?

One viss (1.6 kg. / 3.52 lb.) of pork is 4,500 kyat. One viss of chicken is 6,000 kyat (US \$7.79).

Do you think that the SPDC Army has done anything to help the development of your village?

We have nothing that shows the SPDC Army has contributed to the development [of our village]. They don't do anything related to this. As for our village, they treat us like we are their enemy. Therefore I don't want to say that anything they do has been good [for our village]. They treat us like we are the same Karen people [as the KNLA], so this sometimes causes problems for us.

What is your opinion about the KNLA?

Since I have been working [as village head], the KNLA has prevented the SPDC Army's actions, and so they don't dare to commit abuses of rights as much as they once did. The SPDC Army has decreased their activities a lot and they don't dare to commit as many abuses anymore.

You mentioned about cardamoms, did you grow any cardamom plants yourself? After you have grown them, for how many years does it take before they are ready for harvesting again?

Between three and five years.

How much do people pay for one viss of cardamom?

One viss is sold for between 3,000 (US \$3.90) and 3,500 (US \$4.55) kyat.

How about for coffee? After you have grown the plants, how many years does it take for them to be ready for harvesting again?

At least five years, sometimes more.

How much do people buy coffee for?

People pay 2,000 kyat (US \$2.60) for one viss, but sometimes they can pay 1,500 kyat (US \$1.95) or even 1,200 kyat (US \$1.56) for one viss of coffee.

After you have grown the cardamom plants, how hard do you have to work for the fields to be ready for the new harvest?

We have to look after them for at least five years. We have to clear the grass around the plants twice per year. Then they are ready for harvesting after five years.

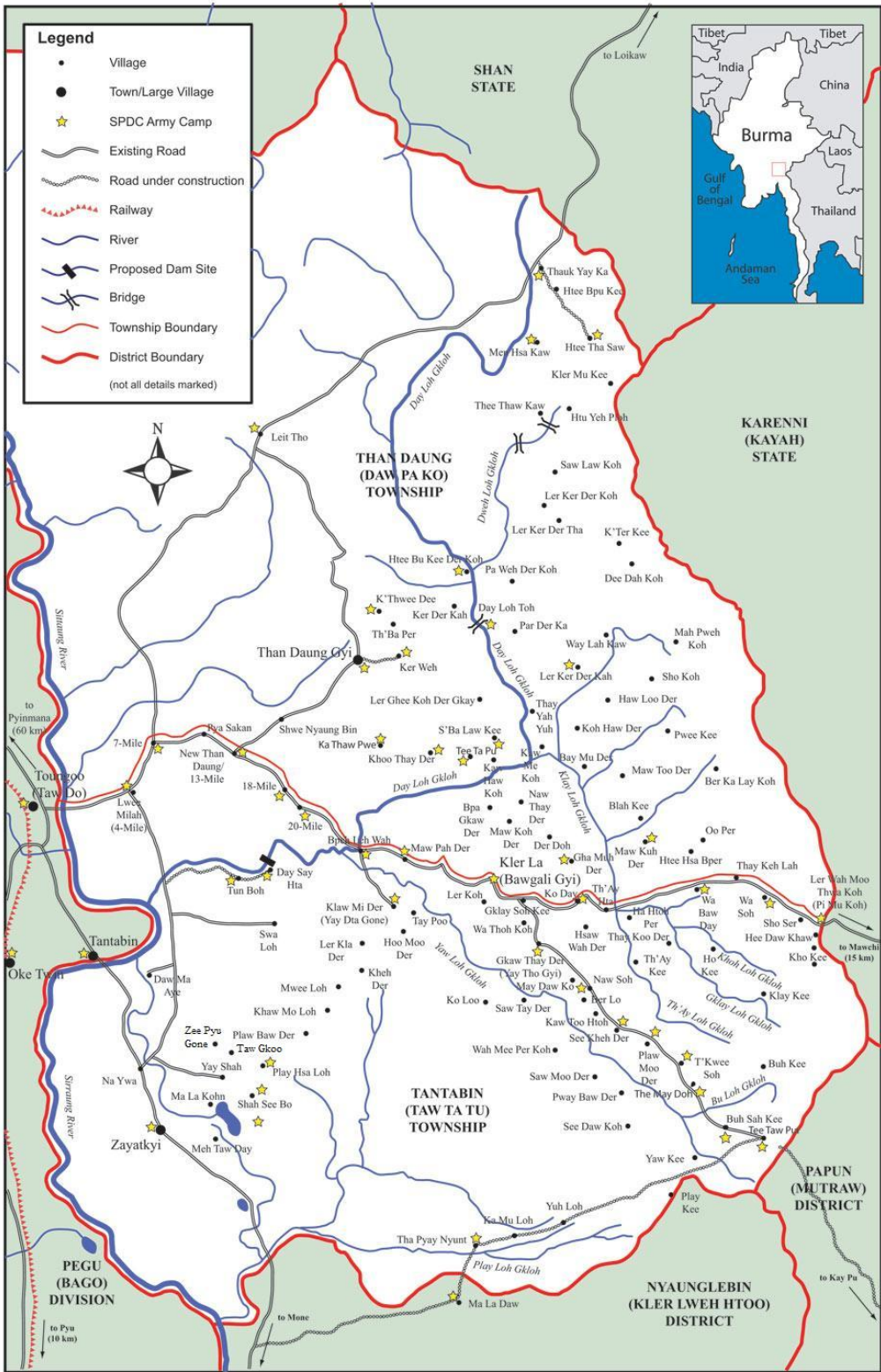
Would you like to report anything else?

I have nothing else to report but I have heard that the SPDC Government and democracy groups have negotiated a lot. Was this successful or not? If it has been successful, I hope the best outcome will happen as a result. We live in the mountains and so we have not seen anything. To have better rights, the ethnic groups need to cooperate together. We hope they [the Burmese Government] will do their best.

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

- "Toungoo Situation Update: July to October 2011" (November 2011)
- "Toungoo Situation Update: October 2011" (November 2011)
- "Toungoo Interview: Saw F---, October 2011" (November 2011)
- "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 (Taw Oo) District



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