



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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## **Thaton Interview: U Kh---, December 2011**

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*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 U Kh---, a 48-year-old farmer who described being forced to porter for Tatmadaw LIB #220 troops for four days at the beginning of September 2011 during which time he witnessed the looting of villagers' animals, as well as the arrest and detention of two P--- villagers to serve as recruits for Border Guard troops and subsequent demands for the payment of 200,000 kyat (US \$259.74) in lieu of each recruit. He described the firing of mortars and small arms in civilian areas and detailed demands for food, weapons, and a motorboat to Border Guard troops. U Kh--- mentioned that he anticipated widespread food shortages as a result of extensive flood damage to paddy crops during the 2011 monsoon season and noted that demands for unpaid forced labour further strained villagers' ability to pursue their own livelihoods effectively. U Kh--- explained that villagers counter burdensome demands by negotiating with local commanders to reduce the number of recruits and pay a smaller sum than demanded in lieu of the provision of recruits.*

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### **Interview | U Kh---, (Male, 48), P--- village, Bilin Township, Thaton District (December, 2011)**

*The following interview was conducted by a villager in Thaton District and is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and security.<sup>1</sup> This interview was received along with five other interviews, one situation update, and 28 photographs from Thaton.<sup>2</sup>*

**Ethnicity:** Karen

**Religion:** Buddhist

**Marital Status:** Married

**Occupation:** Farmer

**Position:** Village head

#### **When did you start serving as village head?**

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 Thaton District can be found in the Report, "Thaton Interview: Naw D---, May 2011," KHRG, February 2012.

It has been over 11 years.

**What problems have you faced since you became village head?**

I face many kinds of problems. My brain is confused because of the Burmese Army [Tatmadaw], like [the time that] they ordered me to follow them for four days. I had to go and sleep in the jungle for three nights. I had to follow them day and night. I can't do that anymore.

**Do you remember when they came and ordered you to follow them?**

It was the day they came to the village. The next day, I had to follow them.

**How many days ago?**

It was on the 5<sup>th</sup> [of September 2011].

**Do you know which battalion unit of the army ordered you to follow them?**

They were from LID [Light Infantry Division] #11.<sup>3</sup>

**Did you know which it was, the LIB [Light Infantry Battalion] or the IB [Infantry Battalion]?**

I didn't ask which one. I was afraid to ask.

**Do you know the [battalion] officer's name?**

No, I don't know. I forgot to ask.

**Where did they go?**

They went to Ky--- then they went to the jungle. They slept at villagers' huts. They built huts and slept in the jungle.

**Did you know what their objective was in going there?**

I don't know.

**How many soldiers were there?**

There were 31 soldiers. I counted them carefully.



This photo, taken in September 2011 by the villager who conducted this interview, shows the interviewee U Kh---, a 48-year-old farmer and P--- village head, who was forced to porter for Tatmadaw LIB #220 troops for four days at the beginning of September 2011. [Photo: KHRG]

<sup>3</sup> The villager trained by KHRG who conducted this interview noted in a separate report submitted at the same time as this interview that U Kh--- had to porter for soldiers from LIB #220 under the command of Battalion Commander H--- within LID #11.

**Do you know where they are based?**

I don't know. They told [me] the [name of the] place where they are based but I forgot. They are from the lower part [an unspecified distance below the village]. One of the monks from the monastery said they were still at the camp.

**How did they treat you after they ordered you to follow them?**

They didn't do anything [to me]. They ordered me to follow them and I followed them. They didn't say anything. They said [to the villagers] to tell the *Kaw Thoo Lei*<sup>4</sup> [Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) soldiers] to avoid them, and they would avoid them when they saw them.

**Did they ask you to carry loads when you went with them?**

*Blòh blòh* [literally 'back burned,' meaning that he had to porter and injured his back as a result.]

**Did they ask you to porter?**

I carried a backpack for him [the officer]. The other two villagers' backbones were burnt [injured] also.

**What about where you slept whilst you were on the trip with them?**

We slept in the mud. It was raining.

**Did they guard you when you slept?**

No.

**What about food?**

We ate together with them.

**What about when they ate curry, for example?**

There was no curry. They just ate bulbs and bamboo shoots because their rations were gone.

**Did you see them take or eat villagers' animals or vegetables from their plantations?**

Yes, they did. They ate villagers' chickens.

**How many chickens did they eat?**

I saw them eat three chickens from a villager's hut.

**Where is the hut owner from?**

<sup>4</sup> Both the researcher conducting the interview and the interviewee used the term '*Kaw Thoo Lei*', which refers to Karen State as demarcated by the Karen National Union (KNU). The exact meaning and origin of the term '*Kaw Thoo Lei*' is disputed; see: Jonathan Falla. *True Love and Bartolomew: Rebels on the Burmese border*, Cambridge University Press: 1991.

He is from Ra---. I didn't see the hut owner. They ran away. If it was not a villager from Ra--  
- it will be a villager from here because it [the hut] is close to here [the interviewee's village].

**When did they let you come back?**

They let me go when they went back to M---.

**Did villagers have to go and pay money to [the soldiers to] let you come back?**

No.

**Did they say anything to you when they let you go?**

No, they didn't say anything. He [the battalion officer] told me "*Don't tell the Kaw Thoo Lei [soldiers] that I am here.*" He just told me that. He didn't say anything else to me.

**Do you have other issues regarding the Border Guard<sup>5</sup> and the SPDC<sup>6</sup> Army demanding [things] that you want to tell me about?**

The Border Guard is *pa pi pu* [causing too many problems for people]. They demand pigs, beer and chickens. I cannot deal with it [their demands] anymore.

**When did it happen?**

It was yesterday. W--- was the one who made the demands.

**What did he demand?**

He demanded [villagers to be] soldiers. He arrested three villagers. He came and arrested nine villagers and detained three. He asked [me] to come and take [the three villagers] back [to the village].

**Have those three people come back now?**

Yes, they came back.

<sup>5</sup> While Tatmadaw and DKBA units have for years operated together, this operational hierarchy became formalised with the DKBA's transformation into a 'Border Guard Force' under control of the Tatmadaw and containing a fixed number quota of Tatmadaw officers. This transformation dates to at least May 2009, when commanding officers stated in high-level meeting of DKBA officers that the DKBA would transform itself into a 'Border Guard Force.' Leaked minutes from the May 2009 meeting are retained by KHRG on file. Ceremonies attended by Tatmadaw commanders officially announced the transformation of large portions of the DKBA into Border Guard Forces in September 2010; see, for example: "Border Guard Forces of South-East Command formed in Paingkyon of Kayin State," *New Light of Myanmar*, August 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010; and "Border Guard Force formed at Atwinkwinkalay region, Myawady Township, Kayin State," *New Light of Myanmar*, August 25<sup>th</sup> 2010.

<sup>6</sup> 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 4-10<sup>th</sup> 2011. The term *Na Ah Pa* was used by the villager who wrote this conducted this interview and "SPDC" is therefore retained in the translation of this interview.

**When did they come back?**

They came back on the 4<sup>th</sup> [of September]. It was the day when I left [the village with LID #11].

**He asked you to go and take back the three villagers. How much did he demand you to pay per person?**

He demanded 200,000 kyat (US \$259.74)<sup>7</sup> per month [for each person].

**Do you have to pay him every month?**

He said [we have to pay] for three months.

**Is that just for the fee [in lieu of recruitment]?**

Yes, it is just for the fee [in lieu of recruitment]. We have to pay 200,000 kyat per month. He asked us to help [pay] him for three months.

**When did they start to ask you to pay?**

They started asking us to pay on the 4<sup>th</sup> [of September]. They arrested villagers and called them back to their base. We went to pay money and we came back. The next day, the Burmese Army came to the village and I [had to] accompany them. It wasn't too long ago. It was four days or five days ago from today.

**Where did they take the villagers they arrested?**

They took them back [with them] to L--- camp.

**You said they detained three villagers?**

Yes, they detained three villagers. You had to pay money to get the villagers released. First, they said they would take three villagers but later they took two. We arrived [at the army camp] and we discussed it with him and he said he would take [money] instead of the two people. He said: *"if you do not give us people, give us money. You have to pay 200,000 kyat per person."*

**It means that they demanded three people from P--- village?**

Yes, they demanded three people. We went and *khay wee thā soo* [negotiated] with him [the Border Guard commander] and he reduced it by one [person]. He asked for two people. For each person he demanded 200,000 kyat. For two people we had to pay 400,000 kyat (US \$519.48).

**Did you pay him as he asked?**

No, we did not pay.

**Did they let the two villagers come back?**

<sup>7</sup> 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 February 7<sup>th</sup> 2012, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 770 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

Yes, they let them come back. We gave them 300,000 kyat (US \$389.61). We will pay him the full amount when the time is close.

**What date did they tell you to pay by?**

They said by the end of October.

**Did they also demand [villagers to be soldiers] from neighbouring villages?**

Yes, they did. They demanded them from every village.

**Do you know what W---'s battalion unit is?**

I don't know.

**You said he lives in L--- army camp?**

Yes.

**Do you know his rank?**

People said he is the Company Commander. He demanded fees [in lieu of recruitment] from our village. Ku--- village had to buy five guns and a *klee set* [motorboat] for them. The village has already bought it. The Ku--- village head told me it was *law bpleel law pu* [scary].

**When did it happen?**

It was the day when I went [to take back the three villagers]. I came back and the next day I had to accompany the Burmese Army. The Ku--- [villagers] had to buy five guns and a motorboat. They had to pay 500,000 kyat (US \$649.35) for the motor boat. They don't know yet how much they will have to pay for the gun.

**How did you get the money to pay them [in lieu of military service]?**

We borrowed money from the monk. We also didn't have the money. If we hadn't pay, they will kill me. They will slit my throat. Now it is harvest time. You have to do it this way because no one wants to [join the army]. They all just want to pay money [instead of joining]. I just do it this way. We have to be afraid of them.

**How will you organize paying back the money that you borrowed from the monk?**

I have to organize it with the villagers. But now, I asked and no one has any money. Later I will have to organize [the money with villagers]. I have to do it this way.

**Do the SPDC Army do things like this?**

The SPDC Army don't do things like that. They haven't done anything. They just call you [to porter] when they see you. They don't demand money.

**Have you seen the SPDC Army eat or steal villagers' chickens when they come to the village?**

They don't do that in the village. They do at villagers' huts [outside the village or in the jungle]. They normally don't do that in the village.

**What about the Border Guard?**

You don't even need to ask about the Border Guard. They demand goats and pigs. They shoot [animals] when they cannot ask [for them].

**When W--- [and his soldiers] came to the village, did you see them shoot villagers' pigs and chickens?**

Yes, they did. They demanded a goat. And they shot a villager's pig. They didn't ask permission from the owner. They just shot it.

**Whose pig did they shoot?**

P---'s pig.

**How many *viss*<sup>8</sup> did the pig weigh?**

It was around 10 *viss* (16 kg / 35.2 lb). It was not a big pig.

**Did they pay the owner?**

How would they pay? People [the owners] don't dare to say [ask for payment].

**How about the goat? How many *viss* did the goat weigh?**

It was around 8 *viss* (12.8 kg / 28.16 lb).

**How much do you think you would have to pay for a *viss* of goat meat?**

We went and we were asked to pay 50,000 kyat (US \$64.94) for the goat.

**It means that they [the Border Guard] ask you [for things] and you have to go and buy them for them?**

Yes.

**What about pork? How much do people sell a *viss* [of pork] for?**

One *viss* is 3,000 kyat (US \$3.90).

**Did they also demand rice?**

No, they haven't demanded that. They've just asked for food like pork, chicken and goat meat. They ask us and we are afraid to refuse. They shot their guns all day. They fired mortars.

**Did they fire mortars when they entered the village?**

Yes, they did.

**How many mortars did they fire?**

<sup>8</sup> A *viss* is a unit of weight equivalent to 1.6 kg. / 3.52 lb.

They fired two mortars. I cannot deal with it anymore. So I asked S--- to go and it disappeared [the firing of mortars stopped]. They [Border Guard troops] get drunk and shoot guns all day from morning to sunset. They shot [guns] and fired mortars. Luckily, they didn't hit the villagers. They [the KNLA] stay close [to the village]. I told them [KNLA soldiers]: *"If you want to go and shoot them, you can go"*. I don't want to stop them [the KNLA] because I cannot say anything to them [the Border Guard soldiers] anymore. Then I ran away. I didn't want to stay close as I was afraid to stay close to them.

**Do they [the Border Guard] harm villagers when they come to the village?**

No, they don't do that. They just ask for alcohol and they fire their guns when they get drunk.

**Are there any other problems that your village has to face?**

No. we don't have [any other problems].

**What about health [care] and education?**

No, we don't have [problems regarding that]. We only have problems with the Border Guard.

**What's about villagers' livelihoods? Do they face any problems this year?**

Yes, we don't have time to do our work.

**What do you mean [when you say that] you have no time to work?**

I have to go [meet the different armed groups], and come back, and go. I have no time to work.

**There was heavy rain this year. Are your villagers' faced with such problems as their paddy dying [from flooding]?**

You don't even need to ask about that issue. All the paddy plants died. The river flooded and whole farms were destroyed.<sup>9</sup>

**How many acres were destroyed?**

Four or five thousand paddy plants were destroyed. One person lost one or two hundred paddy plants. Whole farms were destroyed.

**Did the water reach this place in the past?**

No, the water could not reach here in previous years. There was no water in some years. This happens in just one year out of ten. In other years, water would flood and then go down but this year, the water didn't go down. How can the paddy plants survive this? In the past, the water flooded [the fields] for ten days then it went down. But this year, even

<sup>9</sup> Villagers in eastern Burma trained by KHRG have repeatedly expressed concerns about damage to paddy crops as a result of unusually severe flooding during the 2011 monsoon and resulting food shortages. For further details on flooding in Thaton District, see Thaton Situation Update: June to October 2011, KHRG, November 2011; Thaton Situation Update: Thaton Township, August 2011, KHRG, January 2012. For photographic evidence of damage to agricultural areas in eastern Burma, see Nyaunglebin Situation Update: August to October 2011, KHRG, December 2011.



though September was past, the water hadn't gone down, so how can your paddy plants survive this?

**Do you think your villagers will face any problem in the coming year because of the flooding?**

The villagers will have a food crisis.

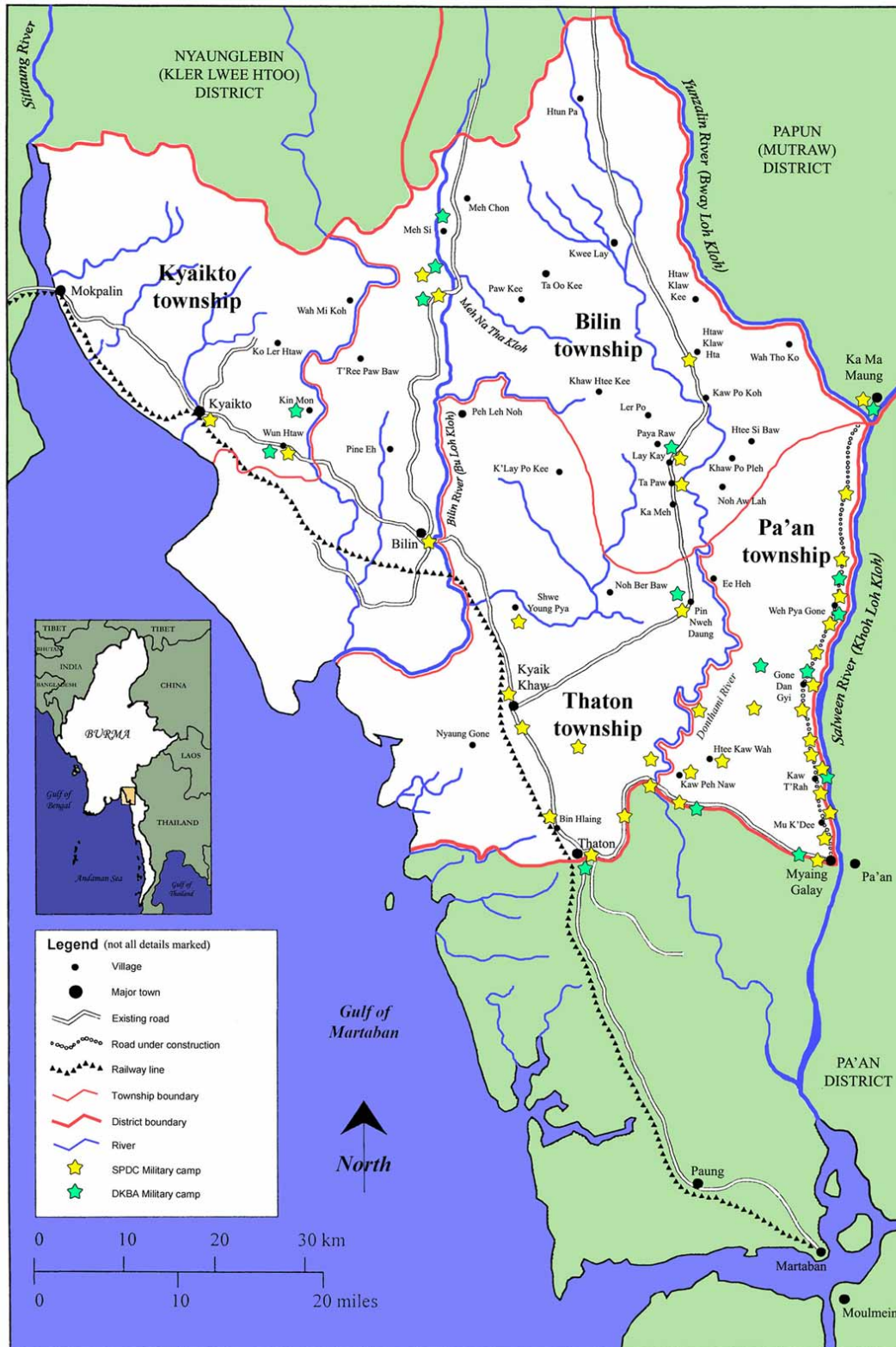
**Do you have any issues that you want to mention that I haven't asked you about yet?**

No, I don't have [any].

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

- "Thaton Interview: Naw D---, May 2011," (February 2012)
- "Thaton Interview: Daw Ny---, April 2011," (January 2012)
- "Thaton Situation Update: Thaton Township, August 2011," (January 2012)
- "Incident report: Four villagers forced to guide Tatmadaw troops in Thaton District," (January 2012)
- "Thaton Interview: Naw L---, February 2011," (January 2012)
- "Thaton Situation Update: June to October 2011," (November 2011)

# Thaton (Doo Tha Htoo) District



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