



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

February 29, 2012/ KHRG #2012-B20

Papun Interview: Maung R---, August 2011

This report contains the full transcript of an interview submitted to KHRG in August 2011 by a villager trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions in Bu Tho Township, Papun District. The villager interviewed Maung R---, a 31-year-old village head, who described extensive demands for forced labour, specifically for villagers to porter military rations, produce thatch shingles and bamboo poles, and tend to plantations owned by Border Guard soldiers. He also detailed demands for money including mandatory payments in lieu of recruitment for portering duties and arbitrary taxation. Threats against villagers were used to ensure compliance with these demands. Past instances of forced recruitment into the Border Guard were mentioned, as well as cases of direct violence, including an attack against villagers with three reported deaths. Other concerns expressed include the absence of basic medical care, and the poor quality of farmland which contributes to food insecurity and can force villagers to seek daily wage work in order to meet their basic food requirements. To mitigate this insecurity villagers employ a range of tactics including the sharing of food, as described by Maung R--- below.

Interview | Maung R--- (male, 31), W--- village, Bu Tho Township, Papun District (August 2011)

The following interview was conducted by a villager in Papun District 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 three incident reports, ten other interviews, one situation update and 64 photographs from Papun.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Farmer

Position: Village head

¹KHRG 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.

²In 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 Papun District can be found in the Report, "Papun Interview: Saw H---, March 2011," KHRG, February 2012.

How many children do you have?

I have two children.

How old is your eldest child?

Three years old.

How about the youngest one?

Only one and a half years old.

What is the religion that most people follow in your village?

They are mostly Buddhist, but one or two households are Christian.

How many households are there in your village?

Over *[censored for security]*.

How big is the population?

There might be over *[censored for security]* people.

What are the villagers' occupations?

They farm hill fields and sugarcane fields.

Do you have a monastery in your village?

Yes, we do.

How many monks are there in the monastery?

It only has one monk.

Do you have pagodas?

Yes.

How many monasteries and pagodas are there?

We have only one monastery and two pagodas.

Do you have a school in your village?

Yes, it was built by the monk.

Is the school a primary, middle, or high school?

It's a primary school.

How many students are there?

[Censored for security] students.

How many teachers are there?

Four teachers.

Were the teachers given by the SPDC [Burmese government]³ or did the villagers hire them themselves?

The SPDC gave them to us.

Their salary is provided by the SPDC. Do the villagers also have to pay them?

Yes, we have to pay the school fees and the book fees.

How much does it cost for one student?

It costs 10,000 or 20,000 kyat (US \$12.99 or 25.97)⁴ for a year.

Where do the school materials come from?

The monk from S--- brings them.

Do the students get support like pens or textbooks?

Even if they've got them they have to pay money.

Do the teachers get support from other groups?

No.

Is your village near P---?

Yes.

How long does it take [to travel] from here to P---?

It takes two hours by foot.

Do you have to go by boat or car?

We have to cross one river [the Yunzalin River] near H--- and L---.

How about if you go by boat?

³In 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 wrote this conducted this interview and interviewee and "SPDC" is therefore retained in the translation of this interview.

⁴All 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 29th 2012, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 770 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

It takes half an hour.

Do you have a clinic in your village?

No, but we have a medic. If our children aren't well, we go to them.

Are there any people who inject medicine to get money?

Yes.

How many?

Two people.

Haven't any other medical groups been to your village?

No.

How about *[organisation censored for security]*?

No, they've also never been here.

How about serious illnesses, where do you have to go [for treatment]?

We go to P--- or S---.

How long does it take [to travel] from here to S---?

If we go by boat, it only takes 20 minutes.

What problems do you have when you send an ill person to P--- or S---?

We don't have any problems.

In one year, how much rice do the people who have the best farm get?

The people who have the best farm usually get 200 baskets of rice in one year.

How about the worst farm?

They get 30 or 40 baskets of rice.

Are there any people who don't get any [rice] in a year?

Yes, some, because their farmland isn't good.

How do these people solve their problems?

We aren't allowed to go anywhere, but some people have rubber plantations so they [those without land] go and clear the vegetation for them and they [do] work such as this for a day's worth of food.

Do they [the villagers] lend [food] to other people?

Yes, if we don't have enough food, we lend [food] to each other. There is no conflict between us.

Has the Border Guard been to your village?

Yes, they have come. We also have *[censored for security]*.

Has the SPDC [Tatmadaw] been to your village?

No.

How about the KNU [Karen National Union] soldiers?

No, last time they came [to another village] but they didn't come to our village.

How many Border Guard soldiers came to your village?

Not many Border Guard [soldiers] came because *[censored for security]*. Only 30 or 40 soldiers came.

Did the SPDC soldiers ever come in the past?

Since the Border Guard was formed,⁵ they have never come.

How about in the past?

Yes, in the past they came. They had a camp at the top of the hill in our village.

What was the camp's name?

B---.

How many soldiers [were there]?

There weren't a lot. It was when I was young so there were only 40 or 50 soldiers. If they heard bad news [regarding KNLA activity], their friends would come to them and there would be over 100 soldiers.

How about the KNU [soldiers], have they ever come in the past?

Yes.

How about recently?

⁵While 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 22nd 2010; and "Border Guard Force formed at Atwinkwinkalay region, Myawady Township, Kayin State," *New Light of Myanmar*, August 25th 2010.

I haven't seen them recently.

Only the Border Guard is active in the village. So when the Border Guard [soldiers] come, how is their relationship with the villagers? Are they aggressive towards you?

No, they come and look at the situation in the village, like how the villagers live and work.

Have they ever forced the villagers [to labour]?

No.

How about carrying loads for them? Have they ever asked [villagers to porter]?

Yes, sometimes if they've had loads they've asked us to carry them to their place [their camp].

How many days did it take at a time?

It didn't take much time. It took only one day.

How long did it take [to travel] from your village to their camp?

It took around two hours.

Did they pay you when you carried loads for them?

They didn't pay [us]. They just gave us food to eat and then we came back.

What kind of loads did you have to carry?

We had to carry rice.

How about bullets, did you ever carry those?

No, we had never carried those because they kept them at their place [camp].

How heavy was one load?

It might have been one *viss* (1.6kg./3.52 lb.)⁶, or over one *viss*.

When you carried loads for them, if you felt sick, did they give you medicine?

Yes, they would give you [medicine] until you had recovered, but [when] you had recovered they wouldn't give you any more.

When they came to your village, did they take your chickens?

No, because we don't have chickens.

Why? Can't you raise [them]?

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

We aren't allowed to raise [chickens] because we stay near S--- and the monk doesn't allow us to. The Border Guard also doesn't allow it.

In the past, when the KNU soldiers came, were they aggressive towards the villagers like the SPDC [Tatmadaw]?

No. In the past, when they came they talked, joked and ate together with us.

Has fighting ever happened in your village?

In the past, there has been fighting once or twice in our village.

When there was fighting, how was the relationship between the SPDC [Tatmadaw], the Border Guard, the KNU soldiers, and the villagers? Did they hit or kill them?

In the past, the SPDC Army fought with the KNU [soldiers] in Tee Tha Daw Klo. After the fighting was over the KNU came back. The villagers were afraid and they wanted to go to the other side of the river so they rowed a boat [across]. The SPDC soldiers thought that the KNU [soldiers] had sent sick people [sick or injured KNU soldiers] so they shot them. The boat turned upside down so the people disappeared. Only my father in law remained.

How many people died?

Three people died. Two grandfathers and one grandchild.

Did you remember their names?

No, I don't remember.

When did they die?

It was ten years ago.

How about now, does fighting like this happen?

No.

Did the SPDC Army plant landmines after they left, because they have done this in other places?

No, they didn't do that.

Have the villagers ever been injured by the SPDC Army's landmines?

No.

When did you become village head?

I became village head when the DKBA [Democratic Karen Buddhist Army] started.

In 1994?

Yes.

Until now?

Yes.

So how many years [has it been]?

It has already been over ten years. My father-in-law was [a member of the] DKBA and I just followed him and joined the DKBA.

[Out of] the SPDC Army, Border Guard and the KNU, which groups have you had problems making friends with?

The most difficult for me was the SPDC Army and the Border Guard. When they came to your village and ate your food they knew you, but when they saw you in other places they didn't recognise you and asked you questions.

They asked you questions and were aggressive towards you?

They weren't aggressive but they asked silly questions.

When the Border Guard asked you to porter, were the villagers able to go?

If we were free we went, but if we weren't free we didn't go.

If you didn't go, did you have to hire other people?

Yes, sometimes we had to hire other people.

How much did you have to pay if you hired [other people]?

We paid them 2,500 or 3,000 kyat (US \$3.25 or 3.90) for one day.

Now, recently have you had to pay money for porters? Or if you failed to go have you had to pay to hire porters?

Yes, before the beginning of May.

In 2011?

Yes.

How did you do that, could you please tell us?

We collected [money] from the villagers. Each house had to give them 5,000 kyat (US \$6.49). In my village, we gave them 250,000 kyat (US \$324.68).

Was it for one year or for one month?

They [the Border Guard] said it was for one year. They said that our three villages had to pay 600,000 kyat (US \$779.22): W--- [the interviewee's village], T--- and M---. The three villages had to pay 600,000 kyat.

Did you have to give the full amount?

Yes, we had to give the full amount.

For how many porters?

Only one porter. From the three villages, one porter had to go for a year. We had to pay them 600,000 kyat for one porter.

How about the SPDC Army, did they ever come and force you [to porter]?

Since the Border Guard was created, the SPDC [Army] have never come.

How did the villagers collect the money? Did they complain?

Yes, the villagers who didn't have money complained. The villagers who had money gave it immediately, but the villagers who didn't have money traded or worked, and after they got it they gave it.

Did you have any plans to make things better for the villagers?

I thought that we wouldn't give it [the money] to them next year.

Was it possible to not give them [the money]?

I don't know, but I thought it would be impossible because when they ask [for] something, they are very aggressive.

How were they aggressive?

Before we gave them money, when they called us for a meeting, *Bo*⁷ G--- from D--- camp said "*if you don't give [the money] I'll kill people*", and he's one person short of having killed 100 people. As I was a village head, I was [too] scared to answer him.

Would he really kill you?

I couldn't tell.

How about in the past, did you see him kill any people?

In the past, that guy who killed people [Bo G---] went to stay in K---. Now [whether] he would do that or not, I don't know.

Did they [the Border Guard] come and threaten you in your village?

No, they ordered us to go to their place [the Border Guard camp].

Where did Bo G--- stay?

In D---.

As you are the village head, have you had any problems managing your villagers?

I have no problems managing my villagers.

⁷*Bo* is a Burmese prefix meaning 'officer'.

Have your villagers complained to you?

Yes, sometimes some villagers who didn't have money and couldn't find money [did]. If you asked them [for money], they complained that they didn't have any money and didn't even have any money for their daily food. I told them that I didn't ask them because I wanted it, but because I was ordered to.

How did the Border Guard or the SPDC Army behave towards you if you didn't give them enough money?

They made things very difficult. For example, if they asked you for 200,000 kyat (US \$259.74) and you gave them only 100,000 kyat (US \$129.87), they would complain.

Did they scold you or scare you?

Yes, sometimes they said nasty things.

Between the villagers and the Border Guard, who made things most difficult for you? The villagers said nasty things to you and the Border Guard did also.

The most difficult for me was the Border Guard.

Why?

It was difficult because if you gave them money they said nasty things to you.

What did they say to you?

They said: *"You stay in the village and we only ask you sometimes so why don't you give us [the money]. We never asked you in the past, we only asked you this year"*.

They had never asked in the past?

Yes, in the past they never asked us. They only asked us this year.

Out of the Border Guard, the SPDC Army and the KNU [Army], which group have you seen most and been most friendly with?

I have mostly seen and had relations with the Border Guard. The SPDC Army and the Border Guard have been very difficult to be friendly with.

Can you see any differences between the three groups, the SPDC Army, the Border Guard and the KNU [Army]?

I don't know the difference.

Out of the SPDC Army, the Border Guard and the KNU [Army], which groups came and abused your rights or destroyed villagers' workplaces?

None of them did that.

If they came, did they inform villagers that they were coming and prevent them from going anywhere [by imposing movement restrictions]?

No, if they came, there was no problem for the villagers to go to their farms or to walk around [freely].

If they came, did they take your animals, for example, chickens?

No, because we don't raise animals.

Did they come and take your pots or rice?

No, but if the SPDC Army's rice was finished they came and took it [the villagers' rice].

I heard that Border Guard Bo G--- demanded rice from [other] villages, one basket of rice and one basket of paddy rice. How about in your village, did they demand rice?

No, but in the past two years, they've demanded one basket of paddy rice from one hill field, and two baskets of paddy rice from one farm [in the interviewee's village].

Did everybody give them it?

Yes, they asked so we had to give them it.

Were you willing to give them it?

No, but because we were afraid of them we gave them it.

Do you have to repair their camp, or cut bamboo poles or thatch shingles for them?

Yes, we have to give them thatch shingles, and they also have rubber plantations so they ask villagers to cut the vegetation for them. They asked one village [to work for] one day.

What do they use the thatch shingles for?

They make roofs for houses.

Do they pay you?

No, they don't pay.

How many thatch shingles does each house have to give [to the Border Guard]?

In the village, if the village head asks for thirty thatch shingles for one house, you have to give thirty thatch shingles. If the village head asks for fifty thatch shingles per house, they have to give fifty thatch shingles.

How many thatch shingles does one village have to give?

Altogether, one village might [have to provide] 2,000 or 3,000 thatch shingles.

Do you have to transport [the shingles]?

Yes, we have to transport them to the river bank, after that they [the Border Guard] come and take them themselves.

Is it very far from the village to the river bank?

It is not far.

Is the rubber plantation field very large?

There are 10,000 to 20,000 rubber plants in some fields.

How many days does it take at a time to cut the vegetation in the rubber plantation?

No, in the morning we go and cut the vegetation. At lunchtime they give us food to eat.

Do they pay you?

No, they don't pay us.

Are you willing to cut the vegetation for them or do they order you [to do it]?

They order us, so we go.

No one is willing to go?

No, [no one is willing] because the villagers also have jobs. Even though they aren't free, they go because they are ordered to. For people who have a big family it is a little easier but for people who have a small family, it is quite difficult for them.

If their camp or houses are damaged, do you have to repair them for them?

Yes.

If you go, how many days does it take?

It only takes one day. Four, five, or ten villagers go together and after we've helped them we come back.

Does that include women?

The women cook for the people who work.

How about children?

No, it doesn't include children.

Does it include children who are 14 or 15 years old?

Yes, they are included when making roofs [thatch shingles].

How many children?

There might be four or five children. There might be ten men.

Have you seen 13 or 14 year old children in the Border Guard?

No, they were 20 years old or over.

Are there any other things that you have to do for them?

No, but in the past, three or four years ago, they demanded soldiers. They said that if one house had two men, one had to go. Even if you didn't dare go, you had to go. In my village they took five people three years ago.

How old were the people who went?

The youngest were 21 and 22 years old.

How about the oldest?

25 years old.

Did you have to hire other people if you didn't go?

No, if they demanded people, they had to go. Some people didn't dare go so they went to Bangkok.

Do the Border Guard get their salary from the SPDC Army?

Yes, they get their salary from the SPDC Army.

As they already get their salary from the SPDC Army, from your point of view, do you think that they should force the villagers [to work for them]?

After they get their salary, they come back by other peoples' boats and ask villagers to carry food to their families' houses.

Do they pay for the petrol?

Yes, they pay for it.

Do they ask you aggressively?

No.

How many people do they ask at a time?

They ask three or four people. They ask them to carry rice to their families' houses.

There are a lot of problems in your village. Which are the most serious?

The most serious for me is cutting the vegetation in the rubber plantations.

How is it serious?

Because we have to do it three times a year. We also don't get paid.

What diseases have occurred most in your village?

Yes, they called it elephantiasis.

How many people got it?

Several people got it.

What are the symptoms of elephantiasis?

If you've got elephantiasis, your joints hurt and you can't walk. We have to inject medicine, and after seven or eight months we can walk.

Do you think that the political situation will be better or worse with the new government? What is your point of view?

I don't know.

What is the difference between the old government and the new government?

I can't tell.

You have been village head for ten years. Has the new government affected your position?

They kept me as a village head. They never changed my position.

In the past, did the Border Guard come and force you [to work]?

Yes.

How about now?

Now, we have to carry food for their families, cut the vegetation in their rubber plantations and send thatch shingles to them.

Would you say that they have changed recently?

Yes.

Why would you say that?

Now, the situation has become a little better.

Would you say that they don't force you [to work] anymore?

No, we wouldn't say that.

Do you think that they will make changes in the future?

I don't know.

With the new government, do you think that you are in a better situation or is the situation the same?

The situation might be a little difficult. Now, goods are becoming expensive.

Are you happy to stay under the control of the new government?

If I [were to] think [about it] carefully, it would be more difficult.

So are you happy or not?

I thought I wasn't happy, but I can't do anything [about it] so I have to put up with the situation.

Do you want to report anything else?

No.

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

- "Papun Interview: Saw H---, March 2011," (February 2012)
- "Papun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township," May to June 2011" (February 2012)
- "Papun Interview: Saw T---, August 2011," (January 2012)
- "Papun Situation Update: Dweh Loh Township, Received in November 2011," (December 2011)
- "Papun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, August 2011," (October 2011)
- "Papun Situation Update: Dweh Loh Township, May 2011," (September 2011)
- "Papun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, April 2011," (September 2011)
- "Papun Incident Reports: November 2010 to January 2011," (August 2011)

