



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

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Toungoo Interview: Saw E---, September 2011

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted during September 2011 in Daw Pah Koh Township, Toungoo District by a villager trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The villager interviewed D--- village head, Saw E---, who described being forced to serve as a guide for Tatmadaw soldiers in an area known to contain landmines. He also provided information about an incident in which two L--- villagers, Saw M--- and Saw P---, were killed by landmines on June 15th 2011 whilst being forced to guide a group of Tatmadaw soldiers. Saw E--- raised concerns regarding villagers' livelihoods, which have been undermined as a result of abnormal weather conditions. He also explained that the standard of education at D--- village school has suffered as a result of the schoolteachers' absences. To counter forced labour demands levied by the Tatmadaw, Saw E--- described challenging the soldiers for whom he was forced to guide by demanding to know their battalion number and commander's name. He also reported that he had on an occasion only partially complied with their demands, supplying 10 villagers as opposed to the 20 ordered, and discussed how he successfully negotiated with Tatmadaw soldiers to reduce the number of times that he was forced to meet with them each week.

Interview | Saw E---, (male, 56), D--- village, Daw Pah Koh Township, Toungoo District (Interviewed in September 2011)

The following interview was conducted by a villager in Toungoo 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 other information from Toungoo District, including three incident reports, seven other interviews, one situation update, and 204 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

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 Toungoo District can be found in the Report, "Toungoo Interview Transcript: Saw L---, December 2011," KHRG, April 2012.

Occupation: Plantation farmer
Position: Village head

How many children do you have?

I have one child.

How many years have you been village head for?

I have been village head for two years.

What are your responsibilities as village head?

I have to take care of my villagers and protect them from abuses by the SPDC Army [Tatmadaw].³

Who appointed you to be the village head? Did you want the responsibility?

The villagers wanted me to be [the village head] so I had to be.

Can you tell us about your experiences since you became the village head until now?

I have had many different kinds of experiences. In the last few months, the SPDC [Army soldiers] have come here and I had to guide them. Furthermore, the police from Than Daung Kyi [town] police station also ordered me to meet them and I had to provide a guarantee for them. This was a very difficult experience.

Why did the police ask you to meet with them?

It was about our Karen people [implying the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)] creating conflict by firing their guns. So, I had to solve this and guarantee that this [would not happen again].

Do you know the [police] commander's name?

I saw that his name badge said *Bo* [Officer] Lay.

When they ordered you to meet with them, did they only ask [for people from] your village?

They sent the order only to my village and they only ordered me to meet them.



The above photo shows 57-year-old Saw E---, who reported on the situation in D--- village and provided information regarding Tatmadaw demands for forced labour in. It was taken on September 10th 2011 in Daw Pah Koh Township, Toungoo District. [Photo: KHRG]

³The villager who conducted this interview and the interviewee used the term Na Ah Pa (State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC) to refer to Burmese military authorities. Many Karen villagers continue to use the phrase Na Ah Pa to refer to military or civilian government officials, despite the official dissolution of the SPDC in March 2011; see: "Mission Accomplished as SPDC 'dissolved'," Myanmar Times, April 4-10th 2011. Similarly, older villagers may still use the phrase Na Wa Ta (State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC) to refer to the Burmese government, even though the SLORC has not officially existed since 1997. In order to ensure clarity in KHRG translations, the terms Na Ah Pa (SPDC) and Na Wa Ta (SLORC) are translated as 'Tatmadaw' when referring to the state military or 'Burma government' when referring to the national government.

Did this include any other villagers?

No, it didn't include any other villagers.

How many households are here in this village?

There are [censored for security] households in D--- village.

What are the villagers' livelihoods?

The villagers in D--- work on their plantations in order to support their livelihoods.

Do the villagers have enough food for the year?

Yes, some villagers have enough food; but most people don't.

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

They work jobs for daily wages.

How much do they get paid per day?

They get 2,000 kyat (US \$2.44)⁴ per day.

Where do the villagers get their income from?

They get an income in the cardamom⁵ and betelnut⁶ [harvest] season.

Have the villagers faced any problems?

The SPDC Army has created problems for us.

Are there any other problems concerning the livelihoods in your village?

Yes, there have been other problems such as the weather, which has not been normal. The villagers have faced further difficulties because of this problem.

Have the SPDC Army come to your village before?

They came to my village between June 12th and 15th 2011.

Did they enter the village?

⁴As of April 6th 2012, all conversion estimates for the kyat in this interview are based on a rate of 818 kyat to US \$1. This reflects new measures taken by Burma's central bank on April 2nd 2012 to initiate a managed float of the kyat, thus replacing the previous fixed rate of 6.5 kyat to US \$1.

⁵Cardamom seeds come from a plant belonging to the ginger family, and are recognized by their small seed pod, papery outer shell and black seeds. Cardamom is typically grown on the jungle floor in South Asian countries.

⁶In Burmese, "betelnut" and "betel leaf" are referred to as "konywet" and "konthih," as if they are from the same plant. The Burmese names are also commonly used by Karen language speakers. "Betel nut" is the seed from an Areca Palm tree, areca catechu; "Betel leaf" is the leaf of the Piper betel vine, belonging to the piperaceae family. See "Attacks on cardamom plantations, detention and forced labour in Toungoo District," KHRG, May 2010.

Yes, they entered the village and then rested for one or two hours.

What did they do when they were in the village?

This time they came and they didn't take our livestock because I had told the officer and the officer told his soldiers, "*sauk yan ma lote neh*" [don't do stupid things]. I went to see him [the officer] at the school and I explained to him that as I understand things, everyone has rights. "*When you arrived in our village we welcomed you. As we also have rights, we want you to understand us,*" I told him.

How many soldiers did they have in one troop?

There were 40 to 50 soldiers.

You said that they stayed in the village for two hours. Did they arrest any of the villagers?

Only myself. I had to be a guide for them.

Can you tell me what happened when you were a guide for them, step-by-step?

When I was a guide for them, the officer told me not to use the path. I said to him, "*Officer, I can't walk through the bushes I can walk only on the path.*" We went quite far away from the village and he told me again "*don't walk on the path; you might step on a landmine*" and so I tried to bypass it. After I went around the path, we heard an explosion. The officer asked me "*what's that noise?*" I lied to them, saying that it was a gunshot from the Than Daung Kyi Monastery, and we continued to go ahead. When we arrived at the betelnut fields, he told me again "*don't walk on the road, we might step on a landmine.*" I tried to bypass the path and then we took a rest. Whilst we were resting, he asked me again what the noise was. I said, "*don't worry it was the sound of a firework or a gunshot from Than Daung Kyi Monastery.*"

After resting we [continued to] go ahead. He told me again not to use the path but I continued to use the path anyway. The officer said "*we're going to Than Daung Kyi so use an alternative route for us.*" I tried to avoid the path for them but again [the route] still followed the path. He yelled at me to go a different way because they were afraid of stepping on landmines. I didn't know the way through the bushes, so later they let me go home.

Do you know the battalion [commander's] name and number?

I asked them for their battalion number but they didn't tell me. I also asked their commander's name but they didn't respond to me. Then, I said, "*you asked for my name so I also want to know your name*".

Why do you think they didn't tell you?

I think they thought that if they told me I would inform others, so they were worried about it. If not for this reason, when they came to the village they committed abuses against the human rights [of the villagers], so I guess they were afraid I would send the information to NGOs [non-governmental organisations]. This is what my understanding is.

Have you heard any reports of the SPDC Army killing any villagers before?

As I mentioned before, when I guided the soldiers, we heard the sound of an explosion. In that explosion, two villagers were killed.

Did the villagers die directly as a result of the incident?

Yes, they died directly from it.

Where did those two villagers come from?

They were from L--- village.

Can you tell us what happened to those two villagers?

Those two villagers died because they were [acting as] guides [for the Tatmadaw]. When the SPDC Army enters any village, one villager has to be a guide to show them which path to use. Because of this [guiding the soldiers], the two villagers died.

Do you know their names?

The L--- villager's name was Saw M---.

How old was he?

He was 33-years-old.

How about the other one?

His name was Saw P---.

How old was he?

He was 35-years-old.

What was the date of the incident?

It was on June 15th 2011, at 10:00 am.

What is the number of the battalion that they were guiding for?

The battalion might be from Ker Weh camp. I know only that.

Did the SPDC Army [demand villagers for] forced labour?

In the past we had to carry rations for them once or twice.

How many villagers did they ask for?

The first time they asked for 20 villagers and the last time they asked for six villagers.

How did they make the demand?

They sent out order letters, which said to send villagers to porter for them.

How many villagers did they ask for in the order letter?

They asked for 20 villagers, but we only sent about 10 villagers.

Do you remember what date this happened?

I only remember the month; it was in April [2011].

How about the other time?

It was also in April.

What did you have to carry for them?

We carried rations for them.

Where did you have to carry the rations to?

We carried them to Gk'Thaw Bweh village.

How many villages had to go?

All the villages had to go.

Can you tell me all the names of the villages that had to [provide villagers]?

They were D---, S'Ba Law Kee, Khu Thay Der, Der Gka, Luh Way Koh, Kuh Weh and Gk'Thaw Bweh villages.

How many villagers from all the villages [combined] had to go?

There were 100 villagers who had to carry the rice.

Did this include women and children?

Yes, this included women and children.

How old were the youngest?

They were about 18- to 20-years-old. They had to carry about 4 bowls (8 kg. / 17.6 lb.) of rice each.

How heavy was the rice that they had to carry?

They had to carry one big tin (10.45 kg. / 35.2 lb.) between four people. They gave the smaller children a little bit less to carry.

How long did it take you to get there?

We went early in the morning and we came back to our village at night-time.

What is the distance between Kuh Weh and Gk'Thaw Bweh?

It takes over one hour [by foot].

Are there any other villages between those two villages?

No, there are no villages in between.

Did anything happen whilst you were carrying things?

No, nothing happened.

Do you have any other things to say about the abuse suffered by the civilians mentioned above?

I do have to say that if it is possible, I don't want the SPDC Army troops to come to my village, because they are a military dictatorship and they only use their power [to get what they want]. From what we have faced and experienced, they're not a good army. We understand that they only want to threaten and persecute the villagers, as they want to destroy all the ethnic minorities; that is my opinion.

Do you have schools in your village?

Yes, we have schools here.

How many standards [grades] does the school have?

Up to the fourth standard.

Who formed the school?

The SPDC government formed it.

How many schoolteachers are there?

There are two female schoolteachers.

Where do the schoolteachers come from?

They come from Than Daung Kyi town.

Could you tell me a little bit about the school?

As for the school, the children are not taught well. Over one month ago, the children couldn't study. Currently, the school has been closed for over a week already. Children can't study properly because the schoolteachers are absent. This has caused big problems for the children.

How much does the government pay a schoolteacher per month?

50,000 kyat (US \$61.12) for each teacher.

The government formed this school, so does it provide the school with stationery such as notebooks?

The government only supports the two female schoolteachers. The village has to try to get all other things [school equipment] by themselves.

How many students are in this school?

There are 20 students.

How much does a student have to pay for school fees to enroll?

One student has to pay 1,000 kyat (US \$1.22) per year for the school fees.

Who do they have to pay [the school fees] to?

They have to pay it to the female schoolteachers.

Do the students study peacefully?

The students can study peacefully but the female schoolteachers don't teach them as well as they could, so their level of education is not as good as it's supposed to be.

Do you know why the female schoolteachers are often absent?

One of the female schoolteachers said that she was absent for over one month because her child was sick. As for the other one, she went back to town one week early before the end of the month to collect her salary and then she disappeared a week afterwards. This always happens. This causes big problems for the children.

Is the Karen language allowed to be taught in the school?

The Karen language is allowed to be taught in the school. I asked the teachers about teaching the Karen language. But as there are no books in the Karen language to teach from, the Karen language is not being taught here.

Has the SPDC Army or KNLA ever disrupted the school?

No, neither the SPDC Army nor the KNLA have disrupted it.

Have the students got enough supplies [stationery] to use at the school to study with?

A few days ago, we went and got some school supplies, such as notebooks, pens and pencils from the KNU [Karen National Union]. But the SPDC government has not given us anything like this kind of support.

Do you have a clinic in the village?

We don't have any hospitals in this village.

If people are sick, where do you send them?

If the disease is serious we send them to Kuh Weh or Than Daung Kyi towns. We can treat each other [here if people] suffer from malaria.

What illnesses do people suffer from the most here?

The most common illnesses are malaria, and children suffering from runny noses and stomach problems.

In your village, can people earn their livelihoods without difficulties?

Here people can earn their livelihoods quite well, but not perfectly.

You said that most of the people here work on plantations?

Yes.

What kind of plants do they grow?

To earn their livelihoods they plant betelnut trees, betel vines and cardamom.

How [in what quantity] do people buy the betel leaves?

They buy the leaves in *viss*.⁷ For 10 *viss* (16 kg. / 35.2 lb.) they pay between 1,000 baht (US \$30.30) and 1,500 baht (US \$45.45).

How about for betelnuts and cardamom?

I don't know what the price is for cardamom, but betelnuts cost 1,000 kyat (US \$1.22) or sometimes even more.

How much do you pay for one big tin (16 kg. / 35.2 lbs.) of rice?

The price of rice in D--- village is 10,000 kyat (US \$12.22) for one big tin.

How much for one *viss* (1.6 kg. / 3.52 lb.) of meat?

One *viss* of pork is between 4,000 and 4,500 kyat (US \$4.89 and \$5.50); one *viss* of fish is 3,000 kyat (US \$3.67); one *viss* of chicken is 5,000 kyat (US \$6.11), and one *viss* of wild game is 3,000 kyat.

Does the SPDC Army help develop your village?

I don't see any villages being developed by the SPDC Army. When they enter the village, we worry and have to be aware of the soldiers stealing things. [In relation] to the development of the village, I have never seen them come to develop our village.

Why do you think they don't help with development?

Because we're Karen people and not their people [Burmans], they won't help us to develop [our village]. As they [the Tatmadaw] say, *kyu pin kod, kyu ngoh mer kyan* [literally 'to cut out a tree, you need to pull out all of the roots'-a Burmese proverb referring to the eradication of the Karen people], so there's no reason for them to develop our village.

How about the school, do they help with development?

They give a little support for books when we send request letters to them, but the villagers help to support [the school] by themselves.

Can you tell me about your experiences as village head step-by-step?

Since I took the responsibility of village head, I have faced lots of problems; I can't count them all. I have forgotten some of the things that have happened to me. In the past, they

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

[the Tatmadaw] treated me badly. They [the Tatmadaw] forced me go and take photos of the Koh Mee Koh bridge and they have threatened me many times; I can't even count how many. They ordered me to take photos and they forced me to do many different things. Moreover, they ordered me to meet with them once a week. Before, I was ordered to go [to meet with them] once per day, but because I asked [to meet with them on fewer occasions] they made it less frequent for me, only once a week. I told them it's not right as I'm getting old and so I don't want to travel so much. If I have special news [to tell them] I will come, but if there is nothing special, I will inform them by sending a letter with a *set tha*⁸. They have agreed with me to do this and so now the problem has been reduced.

Where is the SPDC Army based?

They are based in Kuh Thay Der. I used to have to meet them every day.

Do you have to go to see them currently?

No, I don't have to go.

What do you think about the KNU?

In my opinion, it is a blessing for us that we have the KNLA living in the area. Even though they don't live in our village, [having them nearby] still helps us with security a lot. If we didn't have the KNU, the SPDC Army would persecute us every day. Because the KNLA stands [up to the Tatmadaw] and makes threats by exploding bombs and firing their guns, it makes the SPDC Army scared of them and they persecute villagers less.

Do you have anything else to mention?

Yes, I have many things that I wish to report. As I see it there are many things that our villagers need. I want to support KHRG by sending information but because travelling is difficult we can't send hot [new or important] information quickly. It's a problem for us. As these are modern times, could KHRG help every village in any way to send hot information as quickly as possible? Does KHRG have something that can help us to send the information more quickly?

I want to talk more about the situation in D--- village, as we have lots of problems with our livelihoods and travelling. We want to develop our village and we try to work hard, but we cannot reach it [our goals], so it is our weakness. I hope the leader from above [KHRG] will understand us.

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

- "Toungoo Interview Transcript: Saw L---, December 2011," (April 2012)
- "Toungoo Interview Transcript: Saw M---, December 2011," (March 2012)
- "Ongoing forced labour and movement restrictions in Toungoo District," (March 2012)
- "Incident Report: Forced labour and killing in Toungoo District, July 2011," (March 2012)
- "Toungoo Situation Update: November 2011 to January 2012" (March 2012)

⁸*Set tha* is a Burmese term for forced labour duty as a messenger stationed at army camps or bases and serving as a go-between to deliver orders from army officers to village heads, but also involving other menial tasks when no messages are in need of delivery.

- “Toungoo Interview: Saw T---, September 2011,” (February 2012)
- “Toungoo Interview: Saw D---, September 2011,” (January 2012)

Toungoo (Taw Oo) District

This map illustrates the Toungoo (Taw Oo) District, which is divided into three townships: Than Daung (Daw Pa Ko), Tantanbin (Taw Ta Tu), and Kler La (Bawgali Gyi). The district is bordered by Shan State to the north, Karenni (Kayah) State to the east, and Pagan (Bago) Division to the south. The map features a legend with symbols for villages, towns, military camps, roads, rivers, and boundaries. Numerous rivers are shown, including the Salween River and the Ayeyarwady River. The map also includes a north arrow and a scale bar. An inset map in the top right corner shows the location of the district within Myanmar.

Legend

- Village
- Town/Large Village
- SPDC Army Camp
- Existing Road
- Road under construction
- Railway
- River
- Proposed Dam Site
- Bridge
- Township Boundary
- District Boundary
- (not all details marked)

Townships:

- THAN DAUNG (DAW PA KO) TOWNSHIP
- TANTABIN (TAW TA TU) TOWNSHIP
- KLER LA (BAWGALI GYI)

Neighboring Areas:

- SHAN STATE
- KARENNI (KAYAH) STATE
- PAPUN (MUTRAW) DISTRICT
- NYAUNGLEBIN (KLER LWEH HTOO) DISTRICT
- PEGU (BAGO) DIVISION

Scale:

- 0 to 10 Miles
- 0 to 10 Kilometers

Inset Map:

Map of Myanmar showing the location of Toungoo (Taw Oo) District in the north-central region, bordering Shan State and Karenni State.

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