



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

January 27, 2012 / KHRG #2012-B9

Papun Interview: Saw T---, August 2011

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted during August 2011 by a villager trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The villager interviewed Saw T---, a 74 year-old Buddhist village head who described the planting of what he estimated to be about 100 landmines by government and non-state armed groups in the vicinity of his village. Saw T--- related ongoing instances of forced labour, specifically villagers forced to guide troops, porter military supplies and sweep for landmines, and described an incident in which two villagers stepped on landmines whilst being forced to serve as unpaid porters for Tatmadaw troops. He described a separate incident in which another villager stepped on and was killed by a landmine whilst fleeing from Border Guard soldiers who were attempting to force him to porter for one month. In both cases, victims' families received no compensation or opportunity for redress following their deaths. Saw T--- noted that landmines planted in agricultural areas have not been removed, rendering several hill fields unsafe to farm and resulting in the abandonment of crops. He illustrated the danger to villagers who travel to their agricultural workplaces by recounting an incident in which a villager's buffalo was injured by a landmine. He further explained that villagers' livelihoods have been additionally undermined by frequent demands for food and by looting of villagers' food and animals. Saw T--- highlighted the fact that demands are backed by explicit threats of violence, recounting an instance when he was threatened for failing to comply quickly by a Tatmadaw officer who held a gun to his head. Saw T--- noted that villagers have responded to negative impacts on their food production capacity by performing job for daily wages and sharing food with others and, in response to the lack of health facilities in their community, travel over two hours by foot to the nearest clinic in another village.

Interview | Saw T--- (male, 74), Y--- village, Bu Tho Township, Papun District (August 2011)

The following interview was conducted by a villager in Papun 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 Papun District, including two incident reports, eleven other interviews and one situation update.²

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,

Ethnicity: Karen
Religion: Buddhist
Marital Status: Married
Occupation: Hill field farmer
Position: Village head

How many children do you have?

I have four children but only two are alive now.

How old is your older child?

Six years old.

How about the younger one?

One and half years old, nearly two.

How many years has the village been established?

I haven't lived in this village for a long a period of time, so I don't know. I moved here nine years ago.

How many households are in the village?

There are 56 households.

What religion are most of the villagers?

Most of the villagers are Buddhist.

What do you do to support your livelihood?

I farm flat fields and hill fields.

What do the other villagers mostly do?

Some villagers farm the hill fields, some farm the flat fields and others work in the durian orchards.

Do people climb trees for honey?

Yes.

Do people do any logging?

In the past they have but this year I haven't see anybody do any logging. In the past people used to log wood every year.

How about working on plantations?

KHRG's most recently-published field information from Papun District can be found in the Report, "Papun Situation Update: Lu Thaw Township, November 2011," KHRG, January 2012.

Yes we have a tobacco plantation [in our village].

Do you have a school in your village where the children can study?

In the past we did, but it's already been destroyed. This year we didn't have a lot of time so we haven't repaired it.

Do you have a clinic for the villagers who are sick?

No, we have to go to G--- village.

How many hours does it take to get from here to G---?

Over two hours.

By boat or by foot?

On foot.

How much paddy can a flat field farmer get from one year's harvest?

They only get 60 or 70 baskets of paddy each.

Were there any people who didn't get enough rice for the year?

Yes, some.

Some villagers got 60 or 70 baskets of rice but some didn't. So in your village do all the people have enough food?

Yes, [those without rice] work daily wage jobs and they do this every year.

Do the villages share food with each other?

Yes they do. They borrow food from each other and then they have to pay it back when they can.

Do they have any arguments over the borrowing or lending of food?

No.

Do you have a monastery in your village?

No, we use the monastery in Ti--- as our own.

How long does it take to get from here to Ti---?

Only 30 minutes.

Do you have church in your village?

No. They have [a church] in Gy---.

Have the SPDC [Tatmadaw]³ ever been to your village?

The SPDC came in the beginning of January 2011. They stayed in our village until June 2011.

Have they [the Tatmadaw] been here a few times?

Yes, but only a few times.

Have the Border Guard come to your village?

I haven't seen them come to the village very often, after they arrived they left the area. A few days ago, I saw them come back into the village once, during the *P'Htar* [Buddhist] ceremony .

Were they [the Border Guard] still coming here as recently as June?

Yes.

Have the KNLA come here?

Yes they have come here a few times. They came in January and at the end of February.

When the SPDC Army arrived, which battalions and columns came here and how many soldiers did they bring?

LID [Light Infantry Division] #11 came here with 106 soldiers.

Have they ever been based in the village?

They still are based in our village. They have been staying in our village since the end of March.

Have they set up a military camp?

No they haven't. They just came and now stay amongst the people [in the village].

How do they treat the villagers when they stay in the village?

They order us to do things for them but they don't pay us enough money.

What have they ordered people to do? Do they order people to carry things or to clear the bushes from the side of the road?

³ 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.

They order us to porter. They have ordered us to carry food rations for them.

Where did they order you to carry the food rations from? Where did they order you to send them?

We took the food rations from G--- village and took them to the hilltop.

How far is the distance between those two places?

We woke up and started to leave from here at 5:00 am and we arrived there at 12:00 pm.

How many people were ordered to carry things at one time?

Previously, there were about 30 people.

Including women?

No, without them, just men.

Including children?

Without them too.

How heavy was a load?

Ten *viss* (16 kg. / 35.2 lbs.)⁴

The weight of each load was ten *viss*?

Yes.

What supplies did you have to carry? Food? Bullets?

Not bullets. There was rice, milk and cooking oil.

About 20 or 30 people portered at a time. How many days did it take for one trip?

Only one day.

When you were porters, did they say you could leave or did you just come back on your own?

They let us come back after we had arrived [at the hilltop].

Did they pay you any wages afterwards when they let you go back?

They only paid 1,000 kyat (US \$1.30)⁵ for each person.

⁴ A *viss* is a unit of weight equivalent to 1.6 kg. / 3.52 lb.

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 25th 2011, this unofficial rate of exchange was US \$1 = 770 kyat. This figure is used for all calculations above.

When you went with the Tatmadaw and carried things [porterred], did they give you good treatment if you got sick or were injured?

They treated some patients but two people died.

Why did they die?

Maybe there weren't enough medicines [to treat them].

What happened to them?

They stepped on landmines.

Were they villagers?

Yes, they [were villagers who] stepped on landmines.

How many of them [were injured]?

Only two people.

Were they male or female?

Both of them were male.

What were their names?

One of them lived in N--- and the other one lived in E---.

Do you not know either of their names?

I don't know any of their names because they were guests [from another village] and I had just met them.

Did they die because the Burmese Army did not look after them well [after they were injured], or did they die because they weren't given any treatment at all?

They [the two villagers] died whilst portering, by the time they had reached the soldiers' destination of Kh--- village. The villagers stepped on the landmines at the peak of the hill, and so there were no medicines to treat them with. The Tatmadaw soldiers buried the villagers when they got to Kh--- village.

Did they provide food for the villagers when they ordered people to porter for them? Or did you have to bring your own packs of rice with you?

We had to take our own packs of rice. It took a long time to wait for the rice that they cooked for us as there were so many people. That's why we took our own packs of rice with us.

Did the Tatmadaw soldiers let you eat your food when you took your own packs of rice with you?

Yes.

Did they not pay you as much wages as you were supposed to be given?

Yes, we didn't get the wages we were supposed to be given.

Didn't they look after people enough?

Not enough.

While they were staying in the village, did they punch, swear or shout at people?

They just demanded food. As for the rest of the soldiers, they shouted at villagers when they were drunk.

Did they only shout at the villagers or did they also punch and beat people?

They didn't do things like that but they did point their guns at us.

Did they point at people with a pistol or a machine gun?

We were pointed at with a pistol because he was an officer.

They pointed their guns at people. Did they actually shoot them at people?

They didn't shoot at us.

They just threatened people?

Yes, they threatened people with their guns.

Then [what happened]?

They ordered me to find a pig for them but I couldn't find one easily, so he threatened me by pointing his pistol at my temple. I told him that I would find the pig for him but I hadn't found any yet. I said I could get one for him if he waited patiently. He told me that I had to find a pig quickly.

Did you know the officer's name?

That officer's name was Naing Win Htun.

How many stars did he have [what rank was that officer]?

Three stars.

Is that Company Commander Naing Win Htun of LID #11?

Yes.

And he pointed at your temple with a pistol?

Yes.

Were you able to find a pig for him?

Yes I was.

Did he say anything to you after he received the pig?

He didn't say anything to me.

Did you get any money for the cost of the pig?

The cost of the pig was 55,000 kyat (US \$71.43). We, the villagers, had to pay 10,000 (US \$13) kyat [for the cost of the pig].

Did you pay in Thai baht or Burmese kyat?

Burmese kyat.

They forced you to buy the pig in this way. Then, did they loot or steal any of the village's chickens, ducks or eggs?

They stayed here [at the village] for a long time, so I have no idea about that. But they did shoot and eat the ducks.

Whose ducks did they shoot and eat?

They shot and ate the ducks from that house [pointing to a nearby house].

Whose ducks were they?

Two ducks disappeared.⁶

What is the name of the owner of the two ducks?

Pa Ku---

Pa Kh---

No, *Pa Ku---*

The shooting and eating of the two ducks is [considered] looting and not thought of as stealing. Right?

Yes. The soldiers walked around the village whilst patrolling for security. The villagers wouldn't dare to go outside [to confront the soldiers looting their ducks]. The soldiers were then able to shoot and eat the ducks they wanted.

You know about what happened [in the village]. Did this happen in 2011?

This happened in February 2011.

When the Tatmadaw soldiers went outside [the village], did they need any guides or did they go by themselves?

Sometimes. They only let the villagers go outside of the village to carry things [to porter].

How many people had to go at one time [when portering]?

⁶ According to the KHRG researcher who translated this interview, at this point the interviewee did not understand the question, which is why the interviewee re-phrased it and asked again.

Sometimes over ten people had to go, other times over 30 people had to go.

What did you have to carry for them when portering?

Their [the Tatmadaw soldiers'] rice, milk and cooking oil.

These were their rations?

Yes.

You had to carry their rations from Y--- village. Where did you have to send the rations?

We had to take them to C--- which is along a big mountain range.

How many hours did it take to get there?

We could go there, and then get back to the village by nightfall [the same day].

Did it take the whole day?

Yes, it took the whole day.

Did they order you to do things for free?

Yes they ordered us to do things for free.

Did you take your own packs of rice with you?

Yes, we took our own packs of rice with us. If we waited for them to cook rice for us, they often wouldn't cook rice for us. That is why we always had to bring our own packs of rice.

This [interview] was about how the SPDC Army has treated villagers. How about the Border Guard? Do they come and stay in the village too?

These two groups cooperated together.

What do people have to do for the Border Guard? For instance, do villagers have to build their camp for them?

This year, the Burmese Army was staying here, so the Border Guard couldn't order people to do as many things for them. The Border Guard normally behave like the Burmese Army. They order us to do things for them just as the Burmese Army do. We had to carry things for both of them because they stayed together.

Have there been a lot of Border Guard soldiers in your village?

Before, *Bogyoke* [Major General] Kyaw Than came here with 80 soldiers and he has also come here with over 100 soldiers.

***Bogyoke* Kyaw Than came here once with over 100 soldiers?**

Yes. Not only did they [the Border Guard] come here but also the police and Burmese soldiers came to our village.

What did people have to do for them? Did people have to porter for them like they do for the Burmese Army?

They ordered one person to be a guide for them.

Did the guide have to walk in front of them or behind them?

In front of them.

Did the KNLA come to the village? How many soldiers came?

The KNLA came here once with about 70 or 80 soldiers. They only came one time.

When they arrived, were they based in the village for a long time?

The KNLA?

Yes.

They didn't use the village as a base for a long time. They just came for a short time and then they went back.

Did they treat people in the village like the SPDC and the Border Guard treated people? Such as demanding food, looting and stealing things?

They didn't. They just ate what they had brought themselves.

Did they show aggressive behaviour towards the villagers?

No they didn't.

Did those three armies always come to your village?

Yes, they always come.

Did they ever come across each other in the village? Did any fighting occur in the village?

Fighting never took place. The KNLA ambushed the Tatmadaw forces using remotely controlled explosive devices.

Did the KNLA ambush the Tatmadaw with explosive devices near the village?

They ambushed them on the eastern side of the village.

Who ambushed them [the Tatmadaw soldiers]?

The Black Scarves [KNLA soldiers].

Who did they ambush? The SPDC or the Border Guard?

The SPDC Army.

Did any SPDC soldiers get injured?

Four soldiers got injured.

Did any of them die?

None of them died.

Did the SPDC soldiers come to the village and behave aggressively towards the villagers after the attack?

They didn't behave aggressively towards the people but they did order people to be their guides in order to clear landmines.

Where did they have to clear landmines?

They had to clear landmines along Ht--- Road.

Did any villagers get injured by the landmines?

The villagers didn't get injured. Only the Burmese soldiers were injured. This is because the villagers had already walked past the landmines. The Burmese soldiers stepped on a landmine that the villagers had already passed. Once I guided for 42 soldiers of the SLORC [State Law and Order Restoration Council]. One of the soldiers stepped on a landmine in a stream which we had already crossed over.

Some people had already crossed beyond the landmine when the soldier stepped on it?

Yes, the soldier stepped on the landmine [even though people had already passed it].

So, we could say that the villagers were very lucky?

Yes.

Did the Tatmadaw plant any landmines outside of the village whilst patrolling for security?

They didn't. But the Border Guard planted landmines because they [the Tatmadaw and Border Guard] are part of the same group.⁷

Did they tell any of the villagers that they had planted landmines?

Yes, they informed the villagers after they had planted the landmines.

Did they inform you by saying: "*We have planted landmines in your area.*"?

⁷ Ceremonies attended by Tatmadaw commanders officially announced the transformation of large portions of the DKBA into Border Guard Forces in September 2010. It is worth noting then that, in reporting the the planting of landmines by Border Guard troops, the interviewee is reporting the planting of landmines by troops within the command structure of the Tatmadaw. 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.

They informed us.

Did they remove the landmines after they informed you?

They didn't remove them. They didn't dare to remove them.

Currently, are the landmines still in place there?

The landmines are still there. We don't dare to go to that area.

Are there a lot of landmines?

There are a lot. Around 100 landmines.

There are about 100 landmines?

Yes, about 100 landmines.

Have they planted landmines all the way from here to Ht--- or to O---?

[They have been placed along the way] to O---.

Are the landmines planted beside the road?

They are on the other side of the Meh Nyaw River.

The Border Guard Army planted about 100 landmines. What problems do the villagers face knowing that there are hundreds of landmines?

The problems we face are that we can't find food freely [without the fear of stepping on a landmine] and the places where we can find food have narrowed down.

How about the flat fields? Did they plant landmines close to the fields?

They planted landmines close to hill fields. Three of the hill fields couldn't be harvested.

How much rice could you have harvested from each field?

About 100 baskets of rice (64kg. / 140.8 lbs.).

Because [of the planting of landmines], people have had to leave them [the unharvested hill fields]?

The landmines are there. Nobody dares to go close to them. People just leave the fields the way they are.

Can people find out where the landmines are?

We don't dare to go to those areas [and find them]. They [the Border Guard] have planted, and then re-planted more landmines in the area. This is because they have been ambushed in the hill fields. The number of landmines [has] increased.

Is it only the Border Guard soldiers that plant landmines or do the Burmese Army [Tatmadaw] soldiers also plant them?

The Burmese Army order the Border Guards to plant the landmines.

So actually, the landmines were planted by the Burmese Army?

The Burmese Army plants them too. The Border Guard are the Burmese Army's people and so they order the Border Guard to plant them.

The Burmese Army have planted landmines from Y--- village to O---. There are about 100 landmines?

There are about 100 landmines.

Have they not removed them?

Not yet.

Do buffalos go to that area?

One buffalo has stepped on a landmine already.

Whose buffalo?

That person [pointing to another villager present at the interview].

What is his name?

*P'Doh*⁸ Kw---.

Was it a male buffalo or female buffalo?

Female buffalo.

How much was the buffalo worth?

About 300,000 kyat (US \$389.61), because the buffalo was very fat.

Did the buffalo die?

No she didn't die but her hoof was blown off.

Can you still use her for working [the fields]?

[It's] impossible.

Did this happen within the year?

This happened above my flat field, in the mountain range.

One buffalo has already stepped on a landmine. If other buffalos go to that area, will they step on more of them?

⁸ *P'Doh*, meaning 'big' in Karen, is a prefix ascribed to older men, often in a leadership role, to whom it is wished to show respect.

We don't dare to go to that area anymore. None of the villagers go there. Landmines were planted along the road to that part of the hill fields. We can't go to that side anymore.

When the KNLA arrived here, did they plant any landmines around the village like the Burmese Army did?

As for them [the KNLA], they have planted landmines but then they removed them afterwards.

Did they remove them after their enemies went away?

Yes, they did. Previously, they planted some landmines here. They then removed the landmines they had planted [after the Tatmadaw left the area].

So all three armed groups come one or two times per month, other times they can come once in three months. Out of all three armed groups, what are the differences in the relationship between the village and each group?

I can't explain to you about the different relationships that we have with them. Having the KNLA in the village has been better for me as they have just arrived a few times. As for the other two groups, they *aw say* [literally 'eat money']. It's cost us over 200,000 kyat (US \$259.74).

Which two groups are these?

The Border Guard and the Burmese Army.

It's cost the village over 200,000 kyat. What happened?

When the soldiers were here, we had to re-pay the money to the shopkeepers whenever the soldiers wanted something to eat.

They didn't pay when they bought things from the shops?

No, they didn't pay.

After they left the village, did you have to collect money from the villagers in order to pay back the shopkeepers?

That is what happened. When the soldiers wanted a pig, we sometimes had to pay 5,000 kyat (US \$6.49). Other times we had to pay 10,000 kyat (US \$12.99) for each pig. When they stayed here, they ate more than ten pigs.

How many months did they stay?

They arrived in January and then they went back in April.

They ate more than ten pigs?

In my notes, there were twelve pigs.

They ate twelve pigs within four months. So they ate three pigs per month?

Yes.

How much did you say they cost the village?

Over 200,000 kyat.

These soldiers were part of LID #11. How about the Border Guard soldiers? Do you know their Battalion Number?

I have no idea what their battalion number was.

The Border Guard also uses battalion numbers such as 1011 or 1014. Which group were they part of?

They were *Bo* [Officer] Maung Chit's soldiers.

They were *Bo* Maung Chit's soldiers. How about when the KNLA were in the village? Did they eat a lot of things like that?

Maybe.

Out of the three groups, which group was easiest for you to build a relationship with? Who was the most respectful?

If we talk honestly, when the Border Guard came into the village things were quite stable [compared with the Tatmadaw]. They became better. As for order [in the village] when our younger brothers in the KNLA were here, they came just a few times and little was eaten. We would enjoy feeding them and cooking for them.

Which group was the most difficult for you to build a relationship with?

The SLORC [Tatmadaw].

Why were they the most difficult for you?

When they came to our village, they ordered us to clear landmines for them. Villagers have been faced with a lot of problems when they stayed here.

Does the clearing of landmines continue to happen?

Yes.

Have any villagers stepped on landmines whilst clearing landmines?

No one has. When we have carried things in the past, two people have stepped on landmines because they walked on the wrong path.

Is this the same incident that you mentioned a moment ago?

Yes, one villager was from N--- and the other was from E---.

Nobody else stepped on landmines after that?

One villager from Ah--- [stepped on a landmine].

The villager from Ah---. Were they male or female?

Male.

Do you know [the circumstances of] how he died?

It was because he was fleeing [from them] and ran back the wrong way. One Border Guard soldier had ordered him to go [with them]. But this was not going to be for just for a few days, they wanted him to porter for about one month, so he fled. He ran back the wrong way to the village [and stepped on a landmine].

As for people who have been injured and died whilst portering, did the families receive any support or get paid any money for the value of the people's lives?

They didn't. They [Tatmadaw and Border Guard] just paid a little towards the funeral costs.

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

- "Papun Situation Update: Lu Thaw Township, November 2011," (January 2012)
- "Papun Situation Update: Dweh Loh Township, November 2011," (December 2011)
- "Villager executed in Papun District," (October 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)



