



# Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

## Interview

November 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019 / KHRG Log # 19-76-A1-11

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### **Nyaunglebin Interview: Gold mining activities threaten the livelihoods of villagers in Mone Township, September 2019**

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*This interview describes how Saw H--- and other villagers from S--- village, Thaw T’Koo village tract, Mone Township, Nyaunglebin District are facing livelihood difficulties because of gold mining activities conducted by the Township leaders. This gold mining project started in 2017, and has resulted in water pollution that damaged agricultural lands and the aquatic environment. Even though the villagers have submitted a complaint letter to the local Karen National Union (KNU) authorities, it was ignored. They are now worried that they will not be able to farm and fish to secure their livelihoods in the coming years.<sup>1</sup>*

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**Interview | Saw H--- (Male, 67), S--- village, Thaw T’Koo village tract, Mone Township, Nyaunglebin District (September 2019)**

**Ethnicity:** Karen

**Religion:** Christian

**Marital Status:** Married

**Occupation:** Farmer

#### **What impact has the implementation of the gold mining activities had?**

The villagers are facing difficulties in accessing river space [to fish].

#### **When did these gold mining activities start?**

It has been three years now. The gold mining activities started in 2017.

#### **Do you know who is involved in the gold mining activities?**

To be frank, the gold mining activities are being conducted by the Township leaders [the interviewee means that the Karen National Union Township authorities granted permission to carry out gold mining activities in the area. These activities are conducted by unidentified companies and businessmen employing villagers from S--- village as day labourers].

#### **Approximately, how many acres of paddy fields were destroyed by the gold mining activities over the past few years? How many plots of paddy fields were destroyed?**

Approximately 10 plots of paddy fields [owned by 10 villagers] were destroyed. [The Township leaders] said they would give us compensation, but they did not. Half of each plot of land was

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<sup>1</sup> The present document is based on information received in September 2019. It was provided by a community member in Nyaunglebin district who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions on the ground. The names of the victims, their photos and the exact locations are censored for security reasons.

destroyed by the gold mining [because muddy water flowed into the paddy fields]. Instead of harvesting 300 tins [375 kg], we harvested just over 100 tins [125 kg]. Instead of getting three tins, we got just over one tin.

**Why did they not keep their promise about the compensation?**

It is because they came and lied to us.

**What are the other impacts of the gold mining activities?**

The gold mining activities impacted the aquatic life and even the paddy fields.

**Have you heard that the fish were dying in the river?**

Yes, there were fish dying in the water.

**Did the people whose paddy fields were destroyed return to take care of their paddy fields?**

Yes, they all did.

**How is the situation [gold mining activities and their impacts] this year?**

A lot of paddy fields were destroyed. That is why the farmers want the leaders to come and see the situation, to think of ways to solve this problem.

**Where is the gold mining site located?**

It is on the K'Law Myaw River.

**What place is it close to?**

It is close to L--- village.

**Is the gold mining site located in Htee T'Loh and Thaw T'Koo village tracts?**

Yes, it is located between L--- village and K--- village.

**Does the river from the gold mining site flow into the paddy fields?**

The river is flowing into Thar Luh Plaw [a big field in which S--- villagers are farming].

**Isn't Thar Luh Plaw a place where people grow rice?**

Yes.

**Did you hear about work opportunities this year?**

Yes, there are work opportunities in the K'Law Myaw river [the interviewee is referring to fishing].

**What problems might arise in the future because of the gold mining activities?**

If they continue with the gold mining, we will be afraid to use the water because the chemical [Pa Dah: Mercury] they use to mine gold is very toxic. They use another chemical for the gold mining workers not to suffer itching [because of the mercury pollution]. They use two or three chemicals when conducting gold mining activities.

**What about the price of river space? Are the prices increasing?**

The price of river space [granted for exclusive fishing rights over a two-year period] is increasing. Before, we had to pay 600,000 kyats [USD 396.40 as of November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019] for river space. Now the price the price of river space has increased to 900,000 kyats [USD 594.60 as of November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019].

**Due to the increased river space prices and the continued gold mining activities, what outcomes might arise for the villagers who have access to river space?**

The villagers who have access to river space will have a problem in the future if the gold mining activities continue. [...] If there are no fish left, they will not even buy the river space. The reason they are buying the river space is because they hope to get fish.

**Personally, do you agree with the gold mining activities continuing?**

The villagers do not want this to continue. This river is the blood and breath of villagers [the villagers depend on the river].

**You mean the water is flowing down to the paddy fields and they have been destroyed?**

Yes. It is because the water mixes [with soil] and flows as muddy water into the paddy fields. Even though we tried to prevent the muddy water from coming in, we could not.

**How do you personally want [the gold mining activities] to proceed in the future?**

I want [the gold mining activities] to stop in the future. If not, there will be a lot of consequences for the villagers. Looking back at the four cuts strategy,<sup>2</sup> we could take some rice and salt when we fled. And the people who were living in Mone Township could secure their lives with these paddy fields. Now, our paddies will be destroyed and even the fish will die from the gold mining activities that are continuing. I do believe that no civilians want this to proceed.

**Do you individually have any way to prevent these gold mining activities from polluting water and destroying paddy fields?**

For this issue, we will have to have discussions with the [KNU] Department of Livestock and Fishery. We will have to find a way to solve the problem with the [KNU] Department of Livestock and Fishery and the [KNU] Department of Agriculture.

**Do you think the villagers want to stop the gold mining activities?**

Yes, all the villagers want to stop the gold mining activities.

**Were there villagers engaged in the gold mining activities [as small scale miners]?**

There was only the father of P--- [from S--- village] who talked about working as a [small scale] gold miner. But [in the end] it did not happen [he could not afford to buy the appropriate tools].

**What about those who do not want to object? Why did they not want to object? Is there any reason?**

We can say that they are afraid to oppose the activities that the leaders are conducting.

**What do you think the villagers can do?**

They can only do farming. Other than this, they cannot do anything.

**How did they [the Township leaders] come and discuss with the villagers about the implementation of these gold mining activities?**

They requested us to work together with them. As for me, I responded 'no'. These gold mining activities will have an impact on most people here.

**How many rivers do you think will be affected?**

I think this will affect all of Chaw Haw Gram [an area including parts of K'law Myaw and Puh Law Kloh rivers].

**As you said, they have been conducting gold mining activities for three years now. Regarding the gold mining and its impact, were there any reports made by the villagers?**

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<sup>2</sup> In Burma/Myanmar, the scorched earth policy of 'pyat lay pyat', literally 'cut the four cuts', was a counter-insurgency strategy employed by the Tatmadaw as early as the 1950's, and officially adopted in the mid-1960's, aiming to destroy links between insurgents and sources of funding, supplies, intelligence, and recruits from local villages.

Yes, Maw K--- [another villager] said he would report about this case, and he did. However, there was no result.

**To whom did he report it?**

He reported it to the [KNU] Township [authorities].

**Were there people who took photos?**

No, there were not. Only Maw K--- took photos and reported it. However, I did not hear anything after that.

**What have you heard about the creation of the gold mining committee?**

I have no idea how they are creating the gold mining committee. The Township leaders arranged that. I have no idea about that because they did not come to consult with us.

**I had only these questions for you. Do you have more to say or suggestions for us?**

As for me, I cannot accept the activities that have [negative] impacts on a lot of people.

Further background reading on the impact of economic activities in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Hpa-an Situation Update: Land confiscation by the KNU/KNLA-PC in T’Nay Hsah Township and resettled refugees facing difficulties in Lu Pleh Township, February 7th to May 18th 2019”](#), (November 2019)
- [“Southeast Myanmar Field Report: Growing concerns about militarisation, land tenure security, development projects and human rights abuses, January to June 2019”](#), (September 2019)
- [“Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Logging and gold mining activities threatening community livelihoods, land confiscation by the Tatmadaw and landmine contamination in Mone and Shwegyin townships, November 2018 to January 2019”](#), (August 2019)

**About KHRG**

Founded in 1992, the Karen Human Rights Group is an independent local organisation committed to improving the human rights situation in Southeast Myanmar. KHRG trains local people to document and gather evidence of human rights abuses, and publishes this information to project the voices, experiences and perspectives of local communities. More examples of our work can be seen online at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org).