



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interviews

March 5th, 2020 / KHRG #19-82-A4-I1 and 19-82-A5-I1

Doo Tha Htoo District Interviews: Water pollution caused by a Tatmadaw-run cement factory, October 2019

These interviews with Saw¹ N--- and Naw² Y--- describe events that occurred in Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District between September 2016 and October 2019. Both interviewees reported that coal dust from two Tatmadaw-run cement factories contaminated nearby waterways during the 2019 rainy season, resulting in water shortages and soil pollution in several villages. Local villagers now rely on drinking water donations, and some of them face livelihoods difficulties because they are too afraid to cultivate their paddy fields. The Karen State authorities downplayed the problem on several occasions and failed to take the appropriate measures to provide enough drinking water to the affected communities.³

Interviews | Saw N--- (male, 56), L--- village, Hpa-an Township and Naw Y--- (Female, 49), T--- village, Yathay Pyan village tract, Hpa-an Township (October, 2019)

First interview: Saw N---

Ethnicity: Karen and Bamar (Mixed)

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Writer

Is L--- a town or a village?

L--- is both a village and a village tract. After the cement factory was built, it became more famous and it is now half village and half town.

What are the recent problems the villagers are facing? Are there any difficulties?

Yes, there is. The recent problem we are facing is coal stockpiling. Coal is being put together in one big place. It is near the cemetery that is used by three villages: L---, E--- and D---. These villages are close to the area of the 900-ton⁴ [cement] factory and this is causing them difficulty. In September 2018, the coal was put in a place near the 900-ton [cement] factory.

¹ Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

² Naw is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name.

³ The present document is based on information received on November 4th 2019. It was provided by a community member in Doo Tha Htoo 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. The parts in square brackets are explanations added by KHRG staff.

⁴ This figure refers to the daily production capacity of the factory.

How big is it [the coal pile]?

It is really huge, as tall as a tree.

Is it the height you are referring to?

Yes, it is as high as a tall tree. 20,000 tons of coal was also put near the 4,000-ton [cement] factory in October 2018. Since then, they have started to use the coal [to generate power]. They also brought coal in this summer with ships.

Where did they bring the coal from?

I heard they brought the coal from Indonesia to Thilawa port. Then, they brought the coal [to the factory] from Thanlyin [Salween] River.

Which company is doing this?

I don't know the exact name of the company. However, I heard that three companies have planned to work together since last year.

Can you please tell me the names of the companies that you remember?

I just know the Myanmar Economic Cooperation [MEC].⁵ It [MEC] has subsidiary companies but I don't know their names.

How did the coal that was brought in from Thilawa port affect the villagers?

They brought the coal from Poe Shore port to L--- in October 2018, and put the coal in the depot which could fit 1,000 tons of coal. They brought the 2,000 tons of coal that was left over to the 4,000-ton cement factory. There was no roof or walls where they kept the coal. The coal [dust] was washed away by the rain during the 2018 rainy season, and it got worse during the 2019 rainy season. They started using the coal in October 2018.

Do you remember the day?

No. I don't remember. They had planned to start using it [the coal] in August 2017, but they moved the date because the local villagers were against it.

Were the local villagers against it [the cement factory] before they kept the coal?

Yes, they were. I also have the letters from the villagers who were against the coal project.

How many villages were against it?

There were 27 villages.

How about the population, who was against it, was it both male and female?

There were 5,499 people who signed [complaint letters] against it.

Who did they report it to?

We reported it to the Myanmar President U⁶ Htin Kyaw, the State Counsellor of Myanmar Daw⁷ Aung San Suu Kyi, the Minister of Defence U Sein Win, the Minister of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation U Ohn Win, and seven departments at the state level.

⁵ The Tatmadaw owns and operates two major holding companies – Myanmar Economic Holding Limited (MEHL) and Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC). In an August 2019 report, the UN Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar identified 106 MEHL and MEC owned businesses across diverse sectors of the economy, and a further 27 businesses that are closely affiliated with the MEHL and MEC. The revenue that these military businesses generate strengthens the Tatmadaw's autonomy from elected civilian oversight and provides financial support for the Tatmadaw's operations with their wide array of international human rights and humanitarian law violations (See A/HRC/42/CRP.3).

⁶ U is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

Have the state level or the ministers solved these problems, or do they have solutions for these problems?

There are no solutions but they have ordered us [villagers] to meet with them. We sent complaint letters in 2016 to the Chief Minister [of Karen State], the Minister of Environmental Conservation and the Minister of Forestry and Mines. On November 4th 2016, the Chief Minister met with us [...]. [She] told us [...]: "It [using coal to generate power] is not a problem. Drugs are more terrifying."

Is the Chief Minister from Karen or Mon state?

The Chief Minister is from Karen State.

Can you please state the name of the Chief Minister?

Her name is Daw Nang Khin Htwe Myint.

Who gave permission to store the coal for the factory? Did Daw Nang Khin Htwe Myint give permission?

We don't know exactly but we guess she gave permission. Therefore, we are facing a hard situation now. If she had not allowed it or if she had stopped it; the situation wouldn't be as bad as it is nowadays.

What are the problems the villagers are facing as a result of the coal [dust] being washed away and soaking into ground during the rainy season?

Recently, the colour of the water has changed in the wells and ponds in T--- village, Ya Thay Pyan village tract, W--- and A--- villages, Par Kant village tract, O---, G--- and E--- villages, Pan Kone village tract, and Y--- and Z--- villages, Kaut Yin Aut village tract. It has turned black. The fish from the ponds also died.

How do the villagers get water for cooking and drinking? How do they solve the problem?

We get drinking water from donations and we use alum to purify the water for [domestic use]. However, we are afraid to take a bath with that water. Some people suffered from itching after taking a bath with that water.

Did anybody experience this already?

Yes. I saw on Facebook that people got a skin disease [rash]. Most of them are from W--- village.

How did Nang Khin Htwe Myint or the responsible people from U Paing Company limited take responsibility and solve this problem?

Eleven villages near the cement factory were called to attend a meeting in September and October 2016. They held the meeting in the [cement] factory Thiri Yadana's hall, and the meeting title was: *'Meeting with Local Villagers'*. The chief engineer U Moe Win, the company chief U Nyo Win and some other people attended the meeting. They showed us the plan they had drawn up for using the coal [to generate power]. They said there won't be any damage. They were going to use a high quality machine from Japan [to burn the coal]. They called people who understand the Burmese language and who have the most knowledge from the 11 villages. I was selected to attend the meeting. Villagers from the other villages don't understand the Burmese language. I told them [people from the company] that the machine could cause damage at any time and that it won't last long. Therefore, I asked them in the meeting: *'Will there be any compensation if anything goes wrong with the machine? The air and the ground will be polluted in this area. If anything happens to our husbandry, will you pay compensation?'*

⁷ Daw is a Burmese female honorific title used before a person's name.

For example, if one animal or one person dies, will you give fair compensation for the animal or the person? If there is a healthcare problem, will you pay compensation for the treatment? If the plantations or trees are damaged, will you pay compensation for the plantation areas and the compensation for each tree? Will there be an accountability process for paying compensation? Or will there be contracts which promise to pay compensation for the damage? He [U Nyo Win] said: "The contract has nothing to do with me. The contract is the department's business." Then he said: "If I die or move to another area, who will continue to take this [contract] responsibility?" He questioned us back. We are just villagers so we don't want to talk much and we just stopped there.

So there was no promise or contract.

Yes, there was nothing. I asked him these exact questions. They also gave 50 sacks of cement to each village. However, U--- village, La Ka village tract refused to take the cement sacks. They opposed them [the company] openly in the meeting. The other villages accepted because it would have looked bad if they had refused to take them. However, only one or two villages went to take them after the meeting. The rest did not take them.

Have they used those 50 sacks of cement?

Yes, some villages used those cement sacks. There was a higher number of villages that didn't take those cement sacks. [...] We wrote a complaint letter on November 4th 2016, so the [Karen State] Chief Minister met with us.

What did the [Karen State] Chief Minister tell you?

The Chief Minister said: 'America and China are now rich and developed because they use coal. Only our country has been left behind. Therefore, we must use coal. We can't continue not using coal. Currently, the local civilians are afraid of the coal used in cement factories as if people were going to die tomorrow. There will be no acid rain. Anyway, I will use the coal in the cement factory.' She confidently told the villagers that.

What has happened since [the company started] using the coal?

We wrote a complaint letter against it again and sent it to the Myanmar President at the end of December 2016. Therefore, the Tatmadaw ordered us to meet with them. They secretly called two to three people from each village, as there are many villages, to attend the meeting. First, they called us to meet at the village tract administrator's house. So we gathered at the village tract administrator's house but they [Tatmadaw] did not come. Then, they instructed us to go and meet them at their army camp. But the local people were too afraid to go there and meet with them. Therefore, only the representatives from 27 villages went to meet with them. They [Tatmadaw] asked us: 'How does the cement factory help you? What advantages do you get from it? Why are you against them using coal?' We replied to them that we are worried for future generations and the impacts that our generation will face. This is why we are against the use of coal. If we use coal, it will damage the plantation areas, farming lands and animals both on the earth and under the water. It will cause difficulties for us now, for our livelihood and for future generations. They recorded it and [said] they would report it to the higher authorities. However, they started using the coal in October 2018.

When did the water start to get polluted and change colour?

It was in 2019.

Can you please tell us the closest month?

It was on October 11th 2019. We started to notice it and the [Karen State] Chief Minister met with us on October 13th 2019.

What did she say?

She drank the water as proof. She said there is no problem using or drinking the water and just [told us to] put alum in the water. She put alum in the water and drank it.

Do the villagers dare to or are they able to drink the grey or black water?

The local villagers are afraid to even plant the paddy in the areas where the water has turned grey or black. They are afraid to drink the water too. I saw it [a video] on Facebook and I shared it for other people to see it too. The video is about water that was pumped from Saw H---'s house in T--- village and the water looked like engine oil and it looked very dirty.

Are there any problems when the local villagers drink that water?

Yes, there are.

How do the local villagers try to solve this problem?

There are some people who heard about this water problem and they came to donate drinking water to the local villagers. The Myanmar government also provided water purification machines and they dug artesian wells for us. They are still digging the artesian wells. They did not consult the local villagers first. The local villagers want to drive them out of the villages. The local villagers have to prepare food for them but they don't come to eat it on time. Therefore, the local villagers have to wait for them. The village administrator said: 'It does not matter, if you [the people who are digging the artesian well] don't come to eat on time, you will starve.'

They are trying to dig artesian wells for the local villagers. According to them, will what they are doing allow the local villagers to get enough water for each house?

No, the villagers don't get enough water for every house yet. They can only give drinking water to I---, S---, G---, and R--- villages. The villagers there don't get enough water to use for taking a bath or for [domestic use]. The cows also have to drink whatever water they see.

Oh yeah. I just asked you about the water problem for the humans. I forgot to ask you about the animals. What happened to the animals?

The animals are also facing difficulties [in accessing] drinking water. We also have to let them drink the water we get. If there is not enough water, we have to let them drink the water we put alum in. We let them drink it when the water colour has changed [became less black].

What are the dangers that the cows and buffaloes have faced?

The cows and buffaloes have not yet faced any dangerous consequences. As far as I know only people have faced problems and dangerous consequences recently.

So, are they still digging artesian wells?

Yes. However, there is still a water problem even when we are using the artesian wells and hand pumps. There was a water problem with the normal wells but now even the artesian wells and hand pumps are faced with this water problem. The artesian wells and hand pumps are about 20 to 70 feet [6.1 to 21.3 metres] deep. Therefore, the local villagers have their doubts about this because when they fetch the water there are small solid blocks in the water. When they squeeze those small solid blocks, they look like dust.

Do the local villagers assume it is because of the coal?

Yes, they do.

How about you? What do you think?

I agree with the other local villagers because we've never had this kind of problem in the past.

[How large is the area affected by] the water problem?

I don't know and I cannot guess it. However, they released a map for the areas where the water colour turned black, between the Salween River and Don Na Mee. Even the villages that are far away and behind the mountain, such as Z--- village... their wells also have this problem. Therefore, it is unbelievable for us. However, there are two fish ponds and they said the fish didn't die and nothing has happened to them. There is one well in the factory area but nothing has happened to the water there as well. I thought perhaps it is not the same water channel as the areas where the water colour has changed to grey or black. One of the specialists said the coal quality is bad. If the coal quality were good, there wouldn't have been this much impact on the area.

How did the local villagers try to solve this problem recently?

They contacted CBO/CSOs and news channels and called for action out loud. On October 20th 2019, there was a press conference for the local people to report their feelings and experiences at the Kwe Ka Baw garden hotel.

Were there any CBO/CSOs that documented the local villagers' voices at the press conference?

Yes, there were. The Green Network which is based in N--- where X--- is working. Dr. Khin Maung Nyo asked: *'Did any problems like this happen in the past? Did the fish die? So what do you think about it?'* We said it was because of the coal. There were no such problems in the past. The water colour has changed because of the coal. Nothing happened in the past when there was no coal in the area.

What is the difference between the coal and the water whose colour has changed?

There is no difference and their colour is similar. On October 23rd 2019, I went to record the water colour in D--- when they pumped the water. There are three layers of water in one well. The upper layer is useable, the middle layer is a little bit grey and the lowest [deepest] layer is black and it is very black.

Has there been any earthquake or has something happened in these areas before the water turned black?

No. There was very quick earthquake once in 2002, [...] but not everyone noticed it.

Second Interview: Naw Y---
Ethnicity: Pwo Karen
Religion: Buddhist
Marital Status: Married
Occupation: Unknown

What problems have you experienced during the years you have lived in this village?

We did not experience any problems in the past. However, we have seen and experienced one problem this year [2019]. It is a water problem.

What is the problem with water?

The water has turned black.

Why did this happen?

We don't know the exact reason but we think it is because of the coal liquid [rainwater mixed with coal dust].

If it is because of the coal liquid, where did the coal liquid come from?

The coal is kept at the cement factory. Some people have seen the coal liquid flowing [out of the factory] before.

Which cement factory do you mean?

It is the (No. 2) 4,000-ton cement factory [A Mat (2) Tan Lay Taung cement factory].

In which town is that factory located?

It is in Myaing Ka Lay. It is also known as the Myaing Ka Lay cement factory.

Does the factory use the coal?

Yes, they do.

Do they use it as fuel?

I don't know much about the details.

Why did the coal flow [out of the factory]? Did it melt?

I don't know but I don't think it melted. They stored the coal together in one place. They have also put coal in E--- village recently. They used to put soil there in the past.

What colour did the water in your well turn into?

It turned black.

What is the difference in colour between the water and the coal? Is it similar?

Yes, the water's colour looks like the coal's colour.

How do you feel and what problems do you face when you drink or take a bath with that water?

When we take a bath with that water, our bodies get itchy.

Did you drink it?

We drank the water from the other well over there, but it does not taste or smell good. It doesn't look like it used to in the past.

Have people experienced any dangerous or risky incidents?

They haven't experienced dangerous or risky incidents yet.

What about in the future?

I don't know. It could happen in the future.

You cannot use and drink the water from the wells anymore. How do you solve the problems of drinking water and water for [domestic] use? Who donates water?

People from other villages came and donated it. We asked them: 'Will you be available to come and donate [water] every time?' They said: 'We won't be available to come anymore.'

Which organisations donated the water?

Donors from Hpa-an came with a big truck full of water bottles.

Can you use the [donated] water as sufficiently as you did with the water from your well?

How could we use the [donated] water as sufficiently as we did with our well water? In the past, we could take a bath when we felt hot after coming back from the field [...], even at night up until midnight. But how could we do like we did in the past? Would it be a sin to take a bath with the donated water [which is meant for drinking]? Therefore, we cannot take as many baths as we want.

Therefore, you don't feel free or comfortable because of that. You also have to save the water.

Yes.

What did the responsible leaders from the factory do to help the local people?

They didn't give any support apart from pumping the water from the wells.

How many wells did they dig in this area recently?

They have been digging but there is only one well so far.

Will the well [provide] enough [water] for the local villagers to use?

I don't think so. The water is still not good. But they said they would build enough [wells] for the local villagers.

Do you know where the trucks that dug the well came from?

I don't know.

Did the Karen State Chief Minister come to check on the situation?

Yes, she came.

What is her name?

Her name is Daw Nang Khin Htwe Myint.

Did she come to give any support?

No, she did not give any support. She said the water is useable and drinkable. She told the local villagers that. She also drank the water in front of the local villagers. They also brought one water purification machine.

Do the local villagers get enough water to use now that they have brought one water purification machine?

No, the local villagers do not get enough water. Some people do not even use this water and the purification machine. Some only use and drink the drinking water that was donated.

So, there is no accountability from the Karen State Chief Minister.

Yes, there is no accountability.

Are there any organisations from social groups that have come and given their support? For example, an elderly care team, ADRA or global health aid?

I haven't seen anything or any groups.

What do you think about the change in the water colour?

We feel sad about it. The local villagers are afraid to plant the paddies. We all used to plant the paddies in the past. However, we are afraid to plant the paddies because of that water. We worry that the paddy plants will be damaged. Therefore, we face a lot of problems.

When you said the water colour had changed, what about the soil colour? Has it changed?

Yes, it has changed. The soil also turned black. The upper layer of soil is the same but if you dig the inner layer, it has changed to black.

We know that the local villagers are afraid to drink the water and they don't drink it. What about husbandry? What happens to the cows, buffalos, pigs and chickens when they drink the water? Are there any problems or risky situations that the animals are facing?

We heard the cows are at risk when they drink this water.

The Karen State Chief Minister said it was not a problem to drink this water. Will the local villagers drink it?

No, we are afraid to drink it.

Have you planned or thought about how to get water in the future if the water is still unusable?

We cannot think about it yet. How can we get water to drink and use? How many years will it take until the water is [back to] normal?

You have thought about it then but you don't have the answer.

Yes, we cannot think of the answer yet. We are not sure whether the water is drinkable, even with the artesian well they are digging for us.

Do you remember the date when the water colour changed?

It was already a month or two months ago. It started during the rainy season this year. We did not notice it when it was flooding. We only noticed it when the water started to dry up.

Did the local villagers report this water problem to the Chief Minister Daw Nang Khin Htwe Myint and the Hpa-an township administrator?

Yes, we did.

Are the local villagers against the storage of coal in this area?

The local villagers are against it too.

Did the Karen State Chief Minister step back or listen to the local villagers' voices by halting to this project?

No, she didn't. We haven't talked with her about this coal. Some people said that it is not the coal liquid and they said it might be the decomposed leaves, branches and trees. [...]

Do you think it is the coal liquid or the decomposed leaves, branches and trees?

I think it is the coal liquid. [...] Those leaves, branches and trees decomposed a long time ago. We have never seen this kind of water, even in our grandparent's time.

Were there any earthquakes that occurred within the last two to three years?

No. [...]

What do you want to add to the information about the change in the water colour and your feelings about this?

When they came to the village, they never asked what the villagers concerns were, what the villagers would like to do, nor how they feel about this. They just came and looked into the well and then they went back. They did not ask us anything about the water.

Which group?

It was Daw Nang Khin Htwe Myint's group. They did not ask the villagers anything about what we would like to do and how we want to do it.

So the villagers wanted to tell them but they did not ask.

Yes, we would like to tell them but they did not ask any question to us.

Since you did not get a chance to tell them about your feelings or say what you wanted to say, tell me instead. Tell me as much as you want.

If they ask us, we would like to talk to them. We won't ask for anything except to help us get our land and water from the pond back as it was before.

What else do you want to ask for?

I would like to ask them to shut down the coal [cement] factory. We just want to ask them that. [...]

You would like these factories to shut down. What else do you want to say?

Some people have asked us: 'What did they give you [the villagers] after they opened up and ran the factory?' They did not give us anything. We also now have problems with travelling.

Why?

In the past, we could go to sell vegetables at the market in the town by passing through the fields where the cement factory is now. We could even go, just two or three girls in the early morning. When we arrived there, the door to the market area would not even be opened yet. We had to wait for the door to open and when we arrived there it was still dark. However, now we are afraid to go and sell vegetables and we are afraid to travel with only girls in the early morning.

Why are you afraid of that?

We are afraid of the people there.

Do they stop and check when you travel?

No, they do not stop and check us. In the past they let villagers travel from the down side road [beside the factory] but now they do not let anyone travel anymore.

Since they have built the cement factory, the villagers cannot travel freely anymore.

Yes.



This photo was taken in E--- village in October 2019. The 900-ton cement factory cleared the ground to pile coal in this large area. This ground is close to the cemetery where the local villagers bury or burn the dead. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This photo was taken on October 31st 2019 in U--- village, Ya Thay Pyan village tract, Hpa-an Township, Doo Tha Htoo District. It shows bins left beside the road by local villagers to receive water donations. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This photo was taken on October 31st 2019. It shows the road that goes to the Myaing Ka Lay cement factory. Its colour is turning into black or dark blue because of the coal dust that falls when coal is being transported to the factory. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This photo was taken on October 31st 2019. It shows well water contaminated by coal dust in T--- village. *[Photo: KHRG]*

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

- [“Southeast Myanmar Field Report: Militarisation, environmental pollution and sexual violence against children, July to December 2019”](#), (February 2020)
- [“Nyaunglebin Situation Update: Arbitrary taxation by KNLA soldiers and local watchmen, and gold mining activities resulting in livelihood difficulties in Mone Township, January to August 2019”](#), (December 2019)
- [“Nyaunglebin Interview: Gold mining activities threaten the livelihoods of villagers in Mone Township, September 2019”](#), (November 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.khr.org.