



Interviews

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Mergui-Tavoy District Interviews: Tatmadaw soldiers prevented Karen villagers from displaying their ethnic flag in front of their local school in Ta Naw Th'Ree Township, January 2020

This interview describes events that occurred in Ta Naw Th'Ree [Tanintharyi] Township, Mergui-Tavoy District in January 2020. L--- villagers and teachers decided to erect the Karen flag in front of their local Myanmar government school to represent and honour Karen culture, but the flag pole and the commemorative base they prepared were removed by Tatmadaw¹ soldiers without the villagers' permission.²

Interviews | Naw³ N--- (Female, 21) and Saw⁴ P--- (Male, 36), L--- village, Ta Naw Th'Ree Township, Mergui-Tavoy District (January 2020)

First interview: Naw N---

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Single

[...]

We heard there was an incident where Tatmadaw soldiers removed the Karen flag from L-- middle school. Can you please tell me about it?

Since the beginning of 2019, we had been preparing to hang the Karen flag. The headmaster said hanging the Karen flag wouldn't be much of a problem or even no problem at all. It is legal to do that. We have wanted to hang the Karen flag for a long time now, but we could not do it because we faced many kinds of discrimination [we have struggled to be able to teach the Karen language and wear Karen clothes at school]. We thought we were finally getting the opportunity to do it now. We had meetings with the local people from the whole village three times before deciding to hang the flag. Everyone agreed to do it. Therefore, we chose January 3rd 2020 as the date to install the flag.

¹ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

² The present document is based on information received in January 2020. It was provided by a community member in Mergui-Tavoy 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.

³ Naw is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name.

⁴ Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

On December 30th 2019, we started setting up the pole for the flag and finished it on January 1st 2020. We created a [commemorative] plaque for the stone that would hold the pole. During the evening of January 2nd [2020], we made preparations for the event the following day.

None of the leaders [from the Karen National Union (KNU)⁵ or the Myanmar government] came to talk to us or tell us anything. However, we heard that the Tatmadaw did not agree with what we were doing. They [Tatmadaw soldiers] did not tell our school directly and we did not hear about it from them. When we called the leaders [from the KNU] and told them about what we had heard, they said we already informed the authorities and could continue with our plans. We had already prepared food and decorations, and had created the agenda for the event. We heard that the Tatmadaw informed the village administrator that they did not agree to us displaying the Karen flag. What were we supposed to do now?

We called a meeting that evening and we phoned the Township administrator [from the KNU] who said he already informed the administrator [from the Myanmar government]. The administrator [from the Myanmar government] said to postpone. [However] the [KNU] Township administrator said that it was not possible to move the date or postpone as we had already invited leaders and people from neighbouring villages, and had prepared everything for the event tomorrow. We then held another meeting in the village with the leaders and villagers and decided to continue with the event as planned. If the Tatmadaw come to arrest us and put us in jail, we [all the villagers from the village] will accept to go to jail.

We continued preparing things and I worked on the message for the banner. The decoration around the pole of the flag was almost finished as well. I and another teacher; who teaches Karen, were decorating it. The school headmaster and other people were also working with us in the school at that time.

At 09:30 pm, around twenty Tatmadaw soldiers came to the school and asked who the headmaster is. The headmaster responded: "*I am.*"

What is the name of the headmaster?

The headmaster is Saw E---

Then they [the Tatmadaw soldiers] continued asking questions: "*Who gave you permission to do this? Is there any permission letter? Did the education administrator give his approval? [Because] we called the education administrator H--- and he said he did not give his approval.*" The headmaster replied: "*The education administrator did not say anything to me about whether he gives his permission or not.*"

[The interviewee continues her description of the events:] We [the villagers] are just eager to do it [to express our own identity], not to represent the organisation [KNU] as well. It is only a Karen national flag [representing the Karen ethnic identity]. We have also been teaching Karen in our school for a long time now. That's why [we are hanging the flag]--we just want to represent our ethnic group.

They [the Tatmadaw soldiers] replied [to the headmaster and villagers]: "*There should not be a Karen flag in the government school. Would you raise the English [American/British] flag just because English is being taught in school?*" They continued: "*We cannot allow it because there is a Tatmadaw troop living in the village [and they will not want to have a Karen flag where they live]. Therefore, we cannot permit you to do this.*"

⁵ The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main Karen political organisation. It was established in 1947 and has been in conflict with the Burma/Myanmar government since 1949. The KNU wields power across large areas of Southeast Myanmar and has been calling for the creation of a democratic federal system since 1976. Although it signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015, relations with the government remain tense.

The headmaster said: *"The Township administrator already informed the Operation Commander."*⁶ One of the Operation Commanders who came along with the soldiers said: *"Don't you understand? If you are not allowed to do it, then you just shouldn't do it. Anyway we cannot allow you to do it so we have to remove it [the flag]."* The headmaster replied: *"I cannot do that through my own decision. It [this decision] belongs to the whole Karen ethnic group so I dare not remove it [the flag]. [The decision] belongs to the whole village so the leaders from the village have to handle it."*

At that point the local authorities from the KNU were called to the school. [A few hours later] when they arrived, the Tatmadaw soldiers said: *"We cannot allow [you] to do this [hang the Karen flag]."*

[The interviewee seems to jump to the earlier arrival of the Tatmadaw soldiers at this point] When the Tatmadaw soldiers came, they immediately switched the motor [of the school generator] off. Then the headmaster told them [the Tatmadaw soldiers]: *"You switched the motor off and you just sneaked in."* [The interviewee further explains:] The Tatmadaw soldiers switched off the motor [when they arrived in the village], and two of the soldiers wore plain clothes [civilian clothes]. They were not accompanied by any villagers.

They [the Tatmadaw soldiers] said that [hanging the flag] was the headmaster's fault. But the local [KNU] authorities told them the same thing as the headmaster: *"It [the flag] belongs to the whole Karen ethnic group so we cannot remove it. It is not just the headmaster's responsibility. Everyone from the whole village has made the decision together. All the leaders [KNU, Myanmar government, and Tatmadaw] should understand. In the past, the local villagers experienced danger from the armed conflict. As a result, everyone has been living in fear. They [the villagers] should be given more educational opportunities. Now that the situation is better, it should be possible for villagers to become more aware and informed. We are not in the city, we are just in a Karen village and the village's structure is built in this way. It [the school] does not belong with the organisation [KNU]; it is just an education system."*⁷ *We just want to show that the Karen people have their education system just as Myanmar has its education system. This is just the beginning of the peace process. We would like to make peace, but if you do it [the peace process] that way [by removing the Karen flag], it does not look like peace. If we cannot hang the flag, it will be like we, the Karen people, have no rights, and that would be a violation of Karen people's rights."*

The Tatmadaw said: *"The decision to come was not ours; we were ordered by our leaders. We cannot disobey the order."* They then said: *"We have to remove the flag."* They did not listen to us anymore and they just removed it anyway.⁸ They [the Tatmadaw] continued: *"We don't want to do this but we have to follow our orders."*

Then I started to take a video of them destroying the [commemorative] base and the pole of the flag and they pushed it [the camera] away and said: *"Don't take videos!"* They told me to delete it before they went back [to their army camp]. The headmaster took my phone but we did not delete anything. We also have the audio recorded on my phone.

⁶ KHRG was unable to determine which Operation Commander is being referred to here.

⁷ The KNU authorities are saying that the school is not affiliated with the KNU. They are trying to explain that it is part of the education system and not a political organisation. And for that reason, hanging the flag is not a political act against the Myanmar government.

⁸ The interviewee states here that the Tatmadaw soldiers removed the flag. She is referring to the flag pole and commemorative plaque (the flag itself had not yet been hung). The soldiers tried to remove the pole and base during the conversation between the villagers, the Tatmadaw, and the local KNU authorities, but were unable to do so at that time. The pole and base were removed later that night, after the villagers had left the school.

The headmaster told [the Tatmadaw soldiers] that we won't be able to solve this problem when the leaders come tomorrow [for the flag hanging ceremony]. They responded: *"Since you are educated people, explain it to them [the KNU leaders] so that they understand. If there are any problems or anything happens between us [the Tatmadaw and the KNU], it will be because the teachers failed to properly explain the situation. Therefore, if the KNU [KNLA]⁹ shoots us [Tatmadaw soldiers], then we are ready to shoot them [the KNLA] back. If anything happens tomorrow, solve it. We have to remove the base and the pole because we got the order from the authorities. If the Ministry of Ethnic Affairs gives permission, we will rebuild it."* They [Tatmadaw soldiers] continued: *"It is unsuitable to have two flags in a school. It is not the convention so don't try to do it."*

Did they come with their commander? Do you know the commander's name?

I do not know [if the commander came] and could not see them well in the dark. I just knew that they were Tatmadaw soldiers because they turned the motor off. I heard they came from Operations Command. They were from Light Infantry Battalion [LIB] #265. I think my father knows their commander.

Were the Tatmadaw soldiers from L--- village or is their battalion in L--- village?

The Tatmadaw soldiers are from L--- village. I heard him say that he is the Operations Commander but I don't know which Operations Command he is from. At first, he said he is the Battalion Commander. But when the headmaster asked what kind of order he got from Operations Command, the one who said he is the Operations Commander came out [because he stayed at a distance before]. We did not give them permission to take down our flag but we saw that they had dismantled everything when we came the next morning. They tore down the flag pole and dug up the commemorative base.

When did they come?

They came at night [on January 2nd 2020].

How many times did they come?

They came twice; they came when we were there, and then another time when we were not there.

Do you know what time?

No, I don't know. It was 11:00 pm when we went back home. We only discovered the situation the next morning. No one witnessed it. But we were sure about it because there was one bullet on the ground. They did not shoot anything-- it [the bullet] just fell on the ground and we saw their footprints.

How many teachers are there in L--- School?

There are four government staff in the middle school, four in the primary school, and two staff who are hired as part-time teachers for the [Karen] language, and two office staff. There are [a total of] twelve teachers in the school. I teach Karen and I am also government staff. But I am the one leading this project to hang the Karen flag.

What did the villagers feel or think about it? What do they want in the future?

I felt really sad about it but I am eager to try it again. I will try to raise our Karen flag in the school. If it doesn't happen next time, I will try again. I will try again and again until it happens. The local villagers really got upset about this. If our leaders [from the KNU] do not help us with this, it will be very hard for me to organise the local villagers to try again. The flag will be removed again but I have decided to try anyway. Our leaders should help us make this happen. This kind of incident also occurred in other villages. We want [the KNU leaders] to take action on this issue to be able to raise our Karen flag again. We want to try again because we want our

⁹ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

Karen people to know our tradition and culture, and we want to improve our educational standard. If Burmanisation has too much influence on us, we [Karen people] will not know how to wear our traditional clothes and will not know our Karen [history]. We wear our Karen clothes every Friday as a way of presenting and maintaining our Karen traditional clothes; we also teach Karen language in school. We have done this for almost three or four years. Now we try to raise the Karen flag to represent ourselves as an ethnic group.

[...]

Do you want to add anything more?

I want every school in Karen State to raise the Karen flag. We want the opportunity to raise our flag independently. We also want the permission letter [from KNU authorities] because we didn't receive it--it never reached our village. Even though they [KNU authorities] said they authorised it [hanging the Karen flag], the permission letter didn't reach us. It makes the situation difficult for us because they [the Myanmar government authorities] will always ask us for the permission letter anytime we do anything. They should respect our flag and give permission to us too. We [Karen people] also should know what is legal and what is illegal. Otherwise, they will use our weaknesses and take advantage of that and oppress us. They will just try to get rid of our culture, tradition and language but I want my Karen people not to worry. Our Karen people have had many bad experiences so they are still in fear. Because of that, I want to try to hang the Karen flag and present our culture and traditions to our children while they are young. School is the best place to teach and show them. When they get older, they will know to love their culture, traditions and language. That is all that I want to add.

Second interview: Saw P---

Ethnicity: Karen

Marital Status: Married

We just heard that the Tatmadaw took down the Karen flag. Is that true?

Yes, it is true.

Could you tell me about what happened?

Well, it's a bit long if I tell you the full story. We don't fully understand KNU governance. Local Karen teachers who attended a meeting in the Township came back and told us that, "*it is now permitted to set up our Karen flag in front of the school. Now, it's up to the community members to take action.*" So we held a meeting with the teachers and village leaders, and we finally agreed to display the Karen flag. Myanmar government teachers in our village are also Karen, so I asked them if they were sure [about this] because I worried that [putting up the flag] would be contentious between the KNU and Myanmar government. I told them to go ahead and we all will take responsibility for any potential consequences. We won't blame each other if there is any issue on this case.

When the Tatmadaw found out about this [our plan], they asked me: "*Who is the main person leading the hanging of the Karen flag?*" I told them: "*No one is the main person. We all cooperated together. We got permission from the Township Education Department administrators of both the KNU and the Myanmar government.*" At that point, they [the Tatmadaw soldiers] contacted the Education Department and asked if there was any permission letter granted. They found no evidence of the permission letter from the Education Department administrators. Then, they tried to contact Tanintharyi Township leader Pu Doo Kyaw but they could not reach him since he was travelling. Our village tract leader told [the Tatmadaw soldiers] that this authorisation was not from him [Pu W---] at all. He [a Tatmadaw soldier] suggested that I request permission from the authorities step-by-step and that I go through the formal process. Actually, I do not know this process very well. I usually rely on the school teachers when it comes to school and education matters. I also did not think that this would cause such a problem.

However, the Tatmadaw --probably from the Township-- came and took down the flag. They said that regional authorities would blame them if they did not do this. However, they should not have taken down the Karen flag in such a way. They could have just talked to the community members and asked them to take the flag down. Instead, they came at night and dismantled the base and the pole of the flag.

When did they remove the flag?

It was the night of January 2nd 2020.

Did they ever come to the village before removing the flag?

They came and looked for Pu A--- but they could not find him. Then they asked if we have permission from Myanmar authorities to hang the Karen flag like this. For us, we don't know anything. The KNU government authorised it and told us that they would take responsibility for any potential issue regarding this. As I said, the school teachers attended a training organised by the Karen Education and Culture Department (KECD).¹⁰ After that, they told us that we have permission from the authorities to hang a Karen flag. So, it was up to the villagers whether to do it or not. Of course, we are Karen people. We should have our flag raised in our village school. We called a meeting and decided to hang the flag. We did not know that we had to submit a permission request to the [Myanmar government] authorities step-by-step and that we could only hang the flag once permission had been granted to us.

How did the Tatmadaw remove the flag?

They removed the flag pole and destroyed its foundation [the commemorative base that the villagers built], but not the flag itself [because the flag had not yet been hung]. But I didn't see what really happened. I just know they dismantled the foundation of the Karen flag.

Do you know the battalion number of the Tatmadaw soldiers who came to the village?

They are from Myeik Town, Ein K'Mon camp, Yay Hpyu Operations Command. I do not know their battalion number.

Where was the flag located?

The flag was located in front of the L--- village school.

How many standards [grades] does the school have?

The school goes up to Standard 7 [US grade 7].

How did the KNU take responsibility for this issue?

I don't know how the process is going now. I just know that the local KNU leaders came and questioned us about this in order to report the case further. I don't know anything about how the Myanmar government is dealing with this.

What do you think about the Tatmadaw interfering in education-related matters which are supposed to be the government's responsibility?

Actually I did not know that we have to ask permission step-by-step like this. When the Tatmadaw came and asked me about this, I had no idea. I contacted the Education Department and they said that they did not grant permission for this.¹¹ That's why the Tatmadaw did what they wanted to.

¹⁰ The Karen Education and Culture Department is the education department of the Karen National Union. Its main goals are to provide mother tongue education services to rural Karen populations in Southeast Myanmar, as well as to preserve the Karen language, culture and history. Despite being an important education provider in the region, it is not officially recognised by the Myanmar government.

¹¹ It is not clear from the interview why the Education Department did not grant permission, nor whether they even have the authority to make decisions about such matters.

Do you still have plans to re-hang the flag?

It depends on the community members. If we are united enough and go through the process, I believe we can do it.

How do you feel about this case that the Karen flag was taken down?

I feel like the dignity, rights and power of our people were dismantled along with the flag.

What about the community, how do they feel about this?

Of course we get scared, as we have learned from past experiences. We realise that we have to be careful because our enemies never stop attacking us. If tension happens between the enemy and us [the KNU], we community members will be hurt the most.

What else do you want to share about this case?

I just want to request our leaders to support us and advocate for our rights so that we can have equal rights as other people. We cannot do this on our own because we are powerless, but I believe that our leaders can advocate for us to display our Karen flag and learn our own language. Currently, we are permitted to teach the Karen language once a week on Friday.

Is the Karen language taught during class time?

Yes, they teach it during class time. It takes one to two hours. It is taught in every standard [grade] [1 to 7]. Some students are Burmese, so they do not learn the Karen language because they do not understand it.

Who is the village administrator that you mentioned?

U S--- is the village tract administrator of Thi Hko area.

Do you want to share anything else that I have not asked about?

There is nothing special I want to share. I have told you everything.



These photos were taken on January 1st 2020 in L--- village, Ta Naw Th'Ree Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. They show the flag pole and its commemorative base that were dismantled by the Tatmadaw soldiers in front of the local school. *[Photos: A Villager]*

Further background reading on the issue of ethnic discrimination in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Interview: Naw Ohn Hla, August 2019”](#), (December 2019)
- [“Beyond the Horizon: Local Perspectives on Peace, Justice and Accountability in Southeast Myanmar”](#), (November 2019)
- [“Dooplaya Interview: Saw G---, February 2018”](#), (July 2018)

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.