



Interview

December 16th, 2020 / KHRG # 20-45-A3-I1

Doo Tha Htoo District Interview: Burning by the Myanmar government authorities destroys villagers' plantations in Thaton Township, April 2020

This interview describes events that occurred in Thaton Township, Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District in April and May 2020. Slash and burn fires set by the local Myanmar government authorities on April 11th 2020 destroyed 129 acres of plantation land belonging to 32 villagers in Da Nu village tract.¹ Despite several rounds of negotiation between local leaders and the Mon State authorities, the victims have yet to receive adequate compensation from the Mon State government.²

Interview | Saw³ Thar Thar (male, 36), Da Nu village, Da Nu village tract, Thaton Township, Doo Tha Htoo District (May 2020)

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Position: Village tract administrator

We heard about forest burning [slash and burn fires taking place in the area] so we would like to make sure you know about it. Have you heard about that?

Yes, I am working on this case according to the reports of the villagers. I got a letter [from the Thaton District forest administrator (Myanmar government)] on April 10th saying that they [Myanmar authorities] will start burning the forest, and they started burning the forest on April 11th. They first said that they would get a fire engine, sand bags and everything else ready before they burn. We discussed it in the liaison office and they promised us they would. In their letter, they said that they would burn in the morning but they actually burned the forest around 2:30 pm. It was too hot and very windy so the fire burned 200 acres of forest right away. With [only] 20 to 30 people [to control the fire], the fire could not be put out anymore. At that time, their staff got scared and ran away. I was also here when it was burning but I could not do anything. Then, I informed and contacted the parliamentary representatives [from the Mon State Hluttaw], organisations and other authorities so that the fire engine, the rescue team, the police and Tatmadaw⁴ Battalion #2 that is based in Brigade

¹ A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

² The present document is based on information received in May 2020. 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.

³ Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

⁴ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

1 [Thaton District] could be dispatched to the place. We, as KNU [as Karen National Union⁵ officials], tried to stop the fire before it reached the village, and the Tatmadaw did the same [...]. That was how the fire started.

You said you negotiated [held a negotiation meeting] in the liaison office. Who did you meet at that time?

When we held the meeting in the liaison office, there was the district forest administrator, the KNU Thaton Township administrator, four or five village elders, a monk and me.

Which monk was that?

Our Da Nu village monk.

Who was included from the Myanmar government?

From the Myanmar government, there was the forest township administrator and other forest authorities as well.

What is the name of that township forest administrator from the Myanmar government?

His name is Myo Min Htun.

In the letter, when did they say that they would burn the forest?

In the letter, they did not mention the exact time but they said they would burn it in the morning. They told us to inform the villagers to prepare their houses or gardens to protect them from the fire. If the villagers had prepared their houses during the burning, the fire would have killed them already because it was so strong. No one dared to stay in the village anymore. All the villagers ran away.

When did they start burning [the forest]?

They started burning [the forest] at 2:30 pm.

Did the fire reach the village?

Yes.

How much material or property did the villagers lose?

We found out that 129 acres of villagers' lands have been damaged. That land was owned by 32 villagers. One of them was [lives] in another area and the other 31 villagers were from [live in] Da Nu village tract. [...] More than 20,000 rubber trees were destroyed. There were also durian, mangosteen and dogfruit trees [22,526 rubber trees, 1,019 durian trees, 430 mangosteen trees and 239 dogfruit trees were destroyed].

Does the Myanmar government know about these damages?

After the burning on the 11th, the parliamentary representatives [from the Mon State Hluttaw] arrived on the 12th. The fire was still burning at that time. The fire burned for three days. Government staff did not come to put out the fire. The villagers had to put out the fire themselves. I do not understand why government staff did not show up. Maybe they did not dare to come or they did not have enough people to put out the fire.

Who led the burning team? Who was the leader of the group that started the fire?

It was the township forest administrator from the Myanmar government.

⁵ The Karen National Union (KNU) is the main Karen political organisation. It was established in 1947 and has been in conflict with the 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.

How did they handle the damaged property of the villagers?

On April 15th the State Minister of Natural Resources and Environment called me and told me he would like to meet with the civilians regarding the damaged properties. I do not know where he got my number because I did not know him. Then, I told him not to meet with the villagers yet because we still did not know the exact amount of damaged property. I told him to meet with them after we got the exact amount of the damages. I told him that if he wants to meet them now then he will be able to simply meet them like that [without all of the information]. I told him: "I am not telling you that you do not need to come and meet them [the villagers]. I am just suggesting that you do not come right now". He then responded that he will only come when accurate information about the damages has been collected.

After we collected information about the damages, we contacted him again. He then came to meet with the villagers. At that time, the villagers asked him to compensate them for their losses right away. During the meeting in the liaison office [KHRG was not able to establish the exact date], they [the forest administration] promised that they would compensate five times the value of the damage if any of the villagers' property got burned. So, I told him that, because of the promise they made in the meeting, the villagers are now asking for compensation. Then, I asked him: "How will you take care of this?" On that day, a meeting was held between the Minister of Pa'O Ethnic Affairs, the State Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, two other parliamentary representatives, police officers from the Myanmar government and from the KNU, our Township forest administration group, some KNLA (Karen National Liberation Army)⁶ soldiers and the villagers. They promised us that they would provide the compensation within a week. The Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, Dr. Min Kyi Win, promised it himself.

After a week, we still did not hear anything about the compensation. So I contacted the parliamentary representatives again. They told me that the Chief Minister would like to see me. It was almost a month that we had to wait for the meeting. They told me that the Chief Minister will meet me on May 15th. Then, on May 15th, the village tract administrator and I, along with our village monk, and one or two of the villagers who are the victims of the burning, met with them [the State Minister of Natural Resources and Environment and the Chief Minister] for negotiation. Then, the Chief Minister, Dr. Aye Zan, told us that they have no money to provide for the compensation. They said they are experiencing a financial crisis. I told him that the burning already occurred so they have no choice. I told him to find a way to compensate the villagers anyway. He responded that they have 40 acres of land so they will give that as compensation. I told him that if you only give that land, I do not think the villagers will accept it.

Before I met with the Chief Minister on May 15th, I met with the victims on May 14th. When I met with the villagers, they told me that they only want financial compensation. [...] I told the Chief Minister: "If you only offer them land, then we cannot make any decision right now. We will need to inform the villagers about the offer first." Then we went back home. On the same day at 6 pm, I called all the victims of the burning to the village. After that, I told them about the Chief Minister's offer and asked them what they think. The villagers did not accept the offer. They said they only want money. They do not want land because the land they would be given was land confiscated by the government. The villagers know about the situation and they do not want any conflict, so they would not accept the land as compensation. But the Chief Minister begged us to accept it [the offer] because he said that they do not have the budget to give [financial] compensation to all the villagers who are victims [of the burning]. So, to be fair to both sides, we decided to try to get more than just those lands.

⁶ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

As we were working on that [a new offer], I met again with the Chief Minister, submitted a notification to the township and district offices and also informed the liaison office about it. I am the one working with these organisations to help the villagers, but I informed the authorities properly. The information I provided the authorities did not come from the organisations, it was the villagers' voice. [In the end,] [w]e accepted the Chief Minister's offer because we do not want the relationship between the Mon State government and the KNU government to be broken. As KNU authorities, we asked the villagers to accept the Chief Minister's offer and we told them that we will provide a little more financial support to restart their livelihood.

Then, the villagers started raising the [damage] costs of their burned properties. I told the villagers not to raise the cost too much because we have to do it fairly. We cannot help them with five times the cost of their loss. It was as though we now have three sides or groups: the villagers, the KNU and the Myanmar government authorities. As we continued to negotiate, we eventually came to a resolution. The villagers said that they will be appeased if they are provided 1,000,000 kyats [USD 726.73]⁷ for each acre of damaged land in addition to the land offered by the government. So, on May 16th, I contacted the Minister of Pa'O Ethnic Affairs to inform the Chief Minister about it. Afterward, the Minister of Pa'O Ethnic Affairs called me by phone and confirmed me that the Chief Minister agreed to what the villagers requested. I then informed the villagers that the Chief Minister agreed to give them what they requested: they [the government] will give 40 acres of land [in total] and will also provide 1,000,000 kyats for each acre of land. That is what I informed the villagers. But afterward, I got a call from Saw Kyaw Moe from KYO [Karen Youth Organisation] who lives in Thaton [District] and he told me that the Minister of Karen Ethnic Affairs and the Minister of Pa'O Ethnic Affairs would like to meet with me, our village monk and one or two village elders on May 22nd.

They arrived at our village on May 22nd around 3:30 pm and we started our meeting. I asked the Chief Minister whether he came to discuss the amount he will compensate the villagers. He told me that he can no longer give the amount he promised the villagers. He said that the forest budget has to be submitted to the Union [to the central government] so they do not have the budget for the compensation anymore. We had asked them for 1,000,000 kyats per acre of land and we lost 129 acres of land, so it would cost 129 million kyats [USD 93,748.71] in compensation. They told us they could only pay 40,000,000 kyats [USD 29,069.37] in compensation. [We told them that] if they give that amount, the villagers would only get around 300,000 kyats [USD 218.02] per acre of land. It would be impossible for the villagers to accept that.

The compensation I asked for was not my own request--it was the villagers' request. I asked for it on their behalf. The Chief Minister promised a certain amount [in compensation] and then he reduced the amount again and again. As local authorities, we dared not accept the reduced amount anymore. We tried our best to negotiate in order to maintain a good relationship between the groups [Myanmar government authorities and KNU]. [We told them that] if they could offer instead two thirds of the [original] amount, we would still try to negotiate with the villagers for them. We asked them to reconsider but we still have not heard anything from them.

Do you know the name of the Minister of Pa'O Ethnic Affairs?

I cannot remember her name [San Wint Khaing].

What about the Minister of Karen Ethnic Affairs?

Saw Aung Myint Khaing.

⁷ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the December 15th 2020 official market rate.

Did he come too?

Yes.

Before they started the burning, they promised that if something happens, they will compensate five times the loss right? Which day did they promise that?

The day they met us at the monastery. They told us not to worry about it. They told us they would definitely compensate us if something goes wrong. We actually expressed our concerns at that meeting about the burning because we already knew it had the potential of burning around the places [out of control]. But, they told us not to worry because they would prepare everything before they started burning. This is how they explained it to us.

Who was involved in that meeting?

One of the hundred households' administrators and the local security authorities were involved.

Could you tell me more about the 40 acres of land the Chief Minister will offer as compensation?

The 40 acres of land that they will offer us are located in Soon Inn village tract, in a KNU-controlled area. In the past, the Myanmar government Ministry of Industry confiscated a lot of land there. After confiscating the land, they planted cashew. Then, they cut their cashew trees and the villagers planted rubber trees again on those lands saying that the lands were theirs. When they planted the rubber trees, the government sued them for trespassing. So now, they will give the villagers those lands as compensation. There are two places⁸ where they will offer land. One place is close to the village so we can still accept that. But the other place is in Inn Shay which is close to the Tatmadaw artillery camp. The Inn Shay villagers are working on those lands. We do not want to accept those lands because it is as though they [the government] are trying to start a fight between Da Nu villagers and Inn Shay villagers. If they offer us the 40 acres of land close to our place, we can accept that because no one is working on those lands.

So those 40 acres of lands that they will give you are free, right?

Yes, the Minister of Pa'O Ethnic Affairs told us that those lands are free.

Where are those lands?

Those lands are in a place between Soon Inn and Da Nu village tracts.

Seems like your case is still on-going. So, how will you proceed with it?

In proceeding with this case, we will surely prioritise the voice of the villagers. I personally think that they could provide one hundred million kyats [USD 72,673.42] to the villagers, as they are State authorities [this amount is not much for the Mon State government]. The villagers are now asking only one third of the amount [43 million kyats]. They reduced [their demand] and are only asking for this amount out of consideration for both sides. Even though they reduced it [their demand], the Minister still asked them to reduce it more, so the villagers will not accept and agree to it anymore. The case is now at the State level but if we cannot solve it at the State level, we plan to continue to pursue it at the Union level. I also see that they are violating the NCA's [Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement]⁹ code of conduct.

⁸ Place refers to the name given by local communities to a specific location. It is smaller than what local communities refer to as an area.

⁹ On October 15th 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups, a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between the Burma/Myanmar government and eight of the fifteen ethnic armed groups originally invited to the negotiation table, including the Karen National Union. It was followed by the adoption of a Code of Conduct by the signatories in November 2015. In February 2018, two additional ethnic armed groups signed the NCA under pressure from the Burma/Myanmar government.

When they started this case, they did not send us the official letter to inform us ahead of time. The forest they burned also belongs to the KNU. In Mon State, there are 54 village tracts and 8 village tracts are KNU village tracts. It is officially recognised at the national level. If we have to take this case to the Union level, we will.

What is the estimated amount of the villagers' loss?

If I have to estimate it, the amount that the villagers lost would be around 3 billion kyats [USD 2,180,202.45] because 22,526 rubber trees, 1,019 durian trees, 430 mangosteen trees, 239 dogfruit trees and 60 ironwood trees were destroyed. I just estimated about 3 billion kyats worth of damage but for villagers, it is priceless. I say that it is priceless for them because even amidst the fighting and displacement, they tried very hard to maintain those plantations. Some trees, such as durian trees, bear fruit only after 20 or 30 years. At the time of planting those trees, they had to brave the fighting and wild animals. The land and the plantations are the heritage of their forefathers, so now they [the villagers] are facing a big loss. It was something beneficial for the generations to come but it was destroyed in just a few hours. We tried our best to maintain the relationship between the two groups so we asked the villagers, and they did agree to reduce the amount [of the compensation demanded]. Even though we reduced the amount, they kept asking us to reduce it [again], and now the amount they will give us is less than one third.

What do you estimate is the value of the 40 acres of land the government will give the villagers as compensation?

Let's say 10 million kyats [USD 7,267.34] per acre of land. This is the amount I estimate from the government side. So, 40 acres of land are worth 400 million kyats [USD 290,693.66] and we asked them for 100 million kyats more [USD 72,673.42], so altogether it is around 500 million kyats only [USD 363,367.08].

If the 40 acres of land are accepted as compensation, how will you distribute that among the affected villagers?

If they give us the amount we asked for, we will have to share it with the affected villagers. Some villagers lost more property whereas some lost less. So, for those who have lost more property, we will give them more, and we will give less to those who lost less. I already explained this to the villagers and they agreed to it. For the 40 acres of land, we will also do the same thing. The important thing is to get these lands for sure. We can manage it after getting the land.

If they do not give what you asked or what they promised, what will you do?

The day the Chief Minister came to meet me, on May 22nd, and after they [the Chief Minister] left, I called the villagers on that same day and informed the villagers about what the Chief Minister told me. The villagers did not agree to it. So, the villagers decided that they would submit a letter to both the KNU and the government, and even to Daw¹⁰ Aung San Suu Kyi and the president. We talked about that during our meeting.

Who will take the lead role on this?

We [the village tract authorities] will have to do it for them [villagers] if they report [anything] to us; of course we have the responsibility to report it further to get what they want. So, we need to do it for them as we are the village tract authorities. If the villagers would like to give up, then we also do not need to go further. It all depends on the villagers, whether or not they would like to continue with the case.

Regarding this case, what is your opinion and what would you like to add?

Regarding this case, I would like to say that the government should meet the villagers' demands in order to maintain [good] relations between the KNU and the Myanmar

¹⁰ Daw is a Burmese female honorific title used before a person's name.

government. If they cannot fulfill what the villagers want, we will need to report it to our KNU leaders. If we do that, it will surely impact the relationship between the two groups. So, I think that it is better for them to fulfill what the villagers asked them to do. I just would like to say that.

Thank you for sharing this information.

Yes, I thank you too.

Can we use this for publication?

Yes, you can. This is all for our villagers.

Further background reading on the situation in Doo Tha Htoo District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- "[*Doo Tha Htoo District Situation Update: Land confiscation by private companies and tensions between armed actors, February to July 2019*](#)", March 2020.
- "[*Doo Tha Htoo District Interviews: Water pollution caused by a Tatmadaw-run cement factory, October 2019*](#)", March 2020.
- "[*Thaton Interviews: Skirmishes between the Tatmadaw/BGF and the DKBA Splinter Group resulting in displacement in Kyeh Htoh \(Kyaikto\) Township, June 2019*](#)", December 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.khrq.org.

Doo Tha Htoo (Thaton) District

