



Interview

November 13th, 2020 / KHRG # 20-58-A3-I1

Mu Traw District Interview: Extortion and physical abuse by the Border Guard Force in Dwe Lo Township, December 2019

This interview describes events that occurred in Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District on December 15th 2019. A Muslim driver from E--- area, Section N---, Hpapun town was accused of carrying drugs after a Border Guard Force (BGF)¹ unit planted yaba² pills in the dashboard shelf of his car. The BGF then tried to extort 2,000,000 kyats [USD 1,544.37]³ from him. The driver was threatened and beaten by the BGF, and ultimately had to pay 1,500,000 kyats [USD 1,158.28] to the BGF soldiers.⁴

Interview | E--- area, Section N---, Hpapun Town, Bu Tho Township, Mutraw District (May 3rd 2020)

Name: A---

Gender: Male

Age: 26

Religion: Islam

Ethnicity: Muslim⁵

Family Status: Married

Occupation: Car driver

Have you confronted any difficulty throughout your experience as a driver?

Yes.

Where did the incident happen?

¹ Border Guard Force (BGF) battalions of the Tatmadaw were established in 2010, and they are composed mostly of soldiers from former non-state armed groups, such as older constellations of the DKBA, which have formalised ceasefire agreements with the Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw.

² Yaba, which means 'crazy medicine' in Thai, is a tablet form of methamphetamine.

³ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the November 13th 2020 official market rate

⁴ The present document is based on information received in June 2020. It was provided by a community member in Mu Traw 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.

⁵ The classification 'Muslim' in Southeast Myanmar is referred to and often self-identified as both a religion and an ethnicity. Muslims in Myanmar can be of different or mixed ethnicity. In Rakhine State there are two main groups, the self-identified Rohingya Muslims (not recognised by the Myanmar government and referred to as Bengali) and the Kaman/Kamein Muslims (officially recognised as one of Myanmar's 135 ethnic races). Outside Rakhine State, Muslims can also be Indian Muslims, Pakistani Muslims, Malay Muslims, Chinese Muslims (Panthays), Burmese converts, and Muslims from mixed marriages. Muslims in Southeast Myanmar mostly self-identify as 'Muslim'.

The incident happened in Taung Thone Lone [at the BGF camp in Taung Thone Lone, Htee Th'bluh village tract,⁶ Dwe Lo Township, Mu Traw District].

With whom did the problem happen?

The problem happened with Bo⁷ Ba Yo [Captain from BGF Battalion #1013].

Why did you have a problem with Bo Ba Yo?

I went to transport firewood. It was getting a bit dark. I had two children who accompanied me to help me carry the firewood. Usually, we pay a tax [checkpoint fee] to them [BGF]. When I went on that day...

Tell me. What happened?

I went to transport firewood on that day. The day was different from other days. He [Na Khan Mway, a BGF soldier] asked me to turn off my car's headlights and said he did not allow me to transport firewood. At the house [where he interviewee picked up the wood], there was firewood but it was not enough to fill the car. For one time transporting firewood, I have to put 500 pieces of firewood in the car. But at that house, there were only 300 pieces of firewood. So it was not easy to fill the car with firewood [he had to pick up wood from more than one house].

There were small houses [shops] that sell goods in front of the BGF's gate [checkpoint]. They told me to hurry with loading firewood in the car. [...] I had to use a trolley to carry firewood from the other house to this house. Therefore, it took time. Suddenly, they asked me to turn off the car lights. And then, they asked me to hurry and leave so I got into the car. They called me to go with them for a while into their army camp. I left the two children in the car. When I got inside with them, they were talking about so many issues. Then, they talked about drugs. I told them I do not use drugs and I live an honest life. Then they told me: *'Are you sure? We are going to search your car.'* I told them that they could go and search [the car] because I know myself.

When they went to search the car for the first time, the two children were in the car. These children watched what they were doing. When the investigators [soldiers] searched the car, they did not see anything. I have no idea whether they took money in the car when they went to search the car. I had money in the car. The money was to buy firewood. I had around 70,000 kyats [USD 54.05] in the car. It was someone else's money. None of the money was mine. I do not know when they took the money from the car.

When they searched the car for the first time, his [Bo Ba Yo] soldiers told him there was nothing in the car. He was dissatisfied. He told me that he would let us leave at 3:00 a.m. in the morning. I told him: *'I have my child at home. I cannot stay here. I have only my wife staying at home. There is only my house there. [...].'* I told them that I must go back but they did not allow me to leave.

There was a guy [BGF soldier] named Na Khan Mway. He asked me to bring him a bottle of 'Wi' [whiskey]. I asked him: *'What is 'Wi'?'* Because I did not know what 'Wi' was. I did not understand what he was talking about. They were people who had tried drinking before. I have never tried that thing they were talking about. Actually, he was talking about whisky. I responded that I would bring him a bottle of what he had asked for. I asked him about the price as I had never bought it before. Then he told me it is around 9,000 kyats [USD 6.95]. I agreed that I would bring it for him.

Then, Bo Ba Yo told Na Khan Mway he could buy him that whisky. He then told Na Khan Mway: *'I cannot let them go.'* They were also investigating cars passing through the checkpoint. They

⁶ A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

⁷ Bo is a Burmese title meaning 'officer'.

collected taxes from cars passing through their checkpoint. However, they did not let us go. I noticed him [Bo Ba Yo] ask his soldiers to get him a bag. They were talking in Karen. I could understand a bit of what they were saying even though I did not understand everything. [...] There were guns in one bag and the other bag had... [stops talking] I don't know. He was talking in Karen. He asked his soldier to bring that bag. Then, he handed... [inaudible] to his soldier. I do not know what that thing was. Later, he sent one of the other soldiers to my car. He took the two children out of the car and sent them into their army camp. When they did the search, we were not involved. Then, they did everything they wanted.

If I'd brought that [yaba] earlier in the car, I would have got the smell of it. Isn't it so? I turned on the car's air conditioner all the way. I would have smelled it anyhow. It was hot. I was tired, so, I turned on the car's AC. I would have known if I had it in the car. When they first searched the car, there was nothing in the car. The second time they searched it, he [Bo Ba Yo] brought me to my car and asked his soldiers: *'Are you done checking here and there?'* His soldiers responded to him: *'I am, Sir.'* Then, he asked his soldiers: *'What about that place there? Are you not checking that area?'*

He asked his soldiers to take out the thing from that area and said: *'What is that?'* I took that thing out of the car myself. I didn't know what that was. He took that thing and opened it. He then said: *'These are drugs.'* I told him *'I don't know. I didn't do it. I don't understand. I don't even know where to buy that thing.'* They put that thing in my car's front drawer next to the AC. [...]. I told him *'I did not know. It's not mine I don't know who put this thing in my car.'* He then took me to the camp again. Then, he told me that he would make me hold the drugs, take a photo and post it online. He forced me to hold the drugs. I told him: *'I am not doing that. I am not holding that.'* They put my phone down and put the drugs on it. Then, they took a photo of it.

How many yaba pills?

I don't know if it was one or two. There must have been two. I didn't see clearly how many yaba pills were in there. I wasn't aware of that. They just said it was drugs and they took me to their camp. I didn't even know where they put that thing.

What did they say later and what did they do to you?

They told me that they would send me to the police: *'You'll see tomorrow. You said you guys did not do that, hmm? How come we saw that thing in your car?'* Actually, they were threatening us. We had never experienced this kind of situation, being taken to the police. I also have to think about my family. It's like we will have to suffer whatever they will do [to us]. I was getting afraid, and it was getting dark. Then I asked him: *'What do you want me to do? I will make everything convenient for you. Don't send me to the police.'* Bo Ba Yo told his soldier Na Khan Mway to fine me 1,000,000 kyats [USD 772.19] for each yaba [pill]. [...] They asked me for 2,000,000 kyats [USD 1,544.37] and then they would release me right away.

I told him that was a lot. I told him to reduce the fine he asked for. I do not have that much money. With my siblings, we gathered money to buy this car. At that time, I did not have much work. I have been driving for hire for two years. Before, I used to sell ice cream. If I was trading drugs, I would have been rich by now. I mean if they [police] didn't see and arrest me... Do bad things and the smell of it will one day be revealed. It will be revealed someday, somehow. We are living in an honest manner and have no bad smell [we are not doing bad things], but it happened. I don't know what to say.

What happened with the 2,000,000 kyats [USD 1,544.37]? Did you really have to pay them?

I really had to pay them. I went back home at night. I had to leave the two children who accompanied me at the BGF camp. They told me to let these two children go back and asked me to stay. I responded: *'How will you get the money you asked for, if I stay?'* These two children came to help me. I let these two children stay [at the camp]. Actually, I am afraid to ride

on a motorbike. I came back at night around 11 pm or 12 am. I don't know how I got back home from Taung Thon Lone. The motorbike had no headlight so I had to use my flashlight. When I got home, I asked money from other people, but I could not [get enough]. Later, I borrowed money from my uncle. I told him that I would refund the money to him after I sell my car. I will buy another car when I have money [later]. I will borrow if necessary. I borrowed 1,500,000 kyats [USD 1,158.28] from my uncle. At first, I brought 800,000 kyats [USD 617.75]. Therefore, they handcuffed us. When I went back to them, I asked U⁹ M--- to follow me. I told them he is my neighbour and like an uncle to me. He [Na Khan Mway] was assuming that I was saying U M--- is my uncle. Then, he asked U M---: 'Are you A---'s uncle?' He replied: 'No, I am not.' He said I was lying to him and punched me.

How many times did he punch you?

He punched me around 10 times.

Who punched you? Was that Ba Yo?

[...] Na Khan Mway punched me. After the punching, he handcuffed my hands. They would not release me until I gave them 1,500,000 kyats [USD 1,158.28]. He said he would not let me go. He then said: 'You'll see what will be done to you.' After that, I had to call back home to transfer me the money. At first, I brought only 800,000 kyats [USD 617.75] thinking that maybe I could negotiate to pay that much. In the end, I had to give them 1,500,000 kyats. [...] It was so hard for me.

Do you remember when this happened?

It happened in December [15th] 2019.

Were you released after he got 1,500,000 kyats from you?

Yes. Na Khan Mway did not want to release me even then. He then told me not to transport the firewood. His soldiers told me to keep transporting it and they were saying I had faced injustice. His soldiers approached and told me that they felt sorry about it. I came back without transporting my firewood back to my home.

Can you tell me how did you feel about it?

I was accused even though it wasn't me. Everyone could have misunderstood me when this happened [his family/community could have believed he was guilty]. However, no one did.

What else would you like to talk about in your mind?

[Mother: We don't have appetite to eat and we can't sleep since this situation happened to my son]

We documented this incident. Can you give us permission to use the information you have provided to us?

Yes.

⁹ U is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

Further background reading on human rights abuses committed by the Border Guard Force in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Mu Traw District Short Update: Villagers subjected to forced labour by the Border Guard Force in Bu Tho Township, October 2020"](#), November 2020.
- ["Hpa-an District Interview: Arbitrary arrest and detention, torture and intimidation by BGF soldiers and village authorities, February 2020"](#), June 2020.
- ["Hpa-an District Situation Update: Gambling activities run by armed actors causing social disruption in T'Nay Hsah and Ta Kreh townships, 2019"](#), May 2020.

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.

Mutraw (Hpapun) District

