



## Interview

November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020 / KHRG # 20-70-A10-I1

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## Mu Traw District Interview: Indiscriminate shelling by the Tatmadaw and impact of militarisation on local communities, May to June 2020

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*This interview covers events that occurred in H--- village, Bu Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District between May and June 2020. The interviewee describes how the increasing Tatmadaw<sup>1</sup> presence in the area has led to tensions and sporadic skirmishes between the Tatmadaw and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA).<sup>2</sup> The Tatmadaw also fired mortar shells at civilian areas in several instances, resulting in unexploded ordnance contamination on at least one occasion. In addition, village authorities faced pressure from Tatmadaw soldiers to defuse the tensions between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA. Local leaders were often summoned to Tatmadaw camps and, in one instance, some of them were forced to stay at a Tatmadaw camp for four days. The presence of these two armed actors also resulted in landmine contamination and travel restrictions for the communities affected, undermining their ability to buy food and secure their livelihoods.<sup>3</sup>*

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### Interview | H--- village, Bu Ah Der village tract, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District (June 2020)

**Name:** Saw<sup>4</sup> K---

**Gender:** Male

**Age:** 40

**Religion:** Buddhist

**Ethnicity:** Karen

**Family Status:** Married

**Occupation:** [Local leader]

### Please tell me about the situation in your village. [...]

There are some livelihood challenges related to farming. Our crops were eaten [by insects and mice]. Within this five- to six-month period, the enemy [Tatmadaw] fired shells into the village.

### Do you mean KNLA or Tatmadaw when you say “enemy”?

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<sup>1</sup> Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

<sup>2</sup> The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

<sup>3</sup> The present document is based on information received on July 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020. It was provided by a community member in Mu Traw 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.

<sup>4</sup> Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific used before a person's name.

It was the Tatmadaw.

### **How many shells did they fire?**

They fired five shells but [only] three of them exploded.

### **When did they fire the shells?**

It was on May 18<sup>th</sup> 2020. I went to [see] them [Tatmadaw] on the 19<sup>th</sup> [the next day]. When I went to them, he [a Tatmadaw soldier/commander] asked me: “Why did they [Karen National Defence Organisation<sup>5</sup>-KNLA] fire at us [attack us]?”

I replied: “I don’t know why, they might have had a reason.”

He said: “Htee Ber [KNLA officer] is doing foolish things. Why don’t you report him to the higher authorities?”

[I responded:] “I am a [local leader], so I cannot reach out to them. It is you who have to report it when you see that the KNU [Karen National Union]<sup>6</sup> is doing something wrong. For me, I do not dare to report it even if you ask me to. How can I report it? I am not playing any political role. You should report it [yourself] instead.”

Then, he said: “The important issues depend on the villagers [villagers are the best equipped to communicate with the KNLA]; you have to build a close relationship with them [KNLA] and do the best [you can]. I want to use the road freely. I want the Meh Leh Hta road to be opened for the local villagers. I do not want civilians to be in trouble.”

I said: “I have told them once already, when you first told me this [asked me]. However, they cannot accept it. They see that you are not doing things right either. Here is the situation: it is prohibited to trespass beyond the 50-yard limit [into KNU-controlled territory]. If you trespass, then you are wrong.”

Then, he said: “I do not want to cause trouble for the villagers or for me.” And he told me to ask [permission] for him to use the road. He said: “Tell them [KNLA] this: ‘Do not disturb me on the road.’ I won’t disturb them either; they can circulate as they want. If they feel unwell, they can get treatment from me [from the Tatmadaw healthcare staff at the camp] after I sign a letter [provide a recommendation]. But if they do not want to do this, I can’t do anything. Just ask for permission [for me] to use the road. If I trespass, they can shoot.”

Then, I asked: “What about the increasing numbers [of Tatmadaw soldiers in the area]?”

He said: “What is wrong with it?”

I said: “They [KNDO-KNLA] do not see that you are increasing the number of soldiers in this area to do farming. They see that you are going to move forward [try to control the area]. They think that your higher leaders have a plan, so they occupy places and try to put pressure on the local areas. They secretly sent out their soldiers when they transport food and rations, little by little. [...]”

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<sup>5</sup> The Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO) was formed in 1947 by the Karen National Union and is the precursor to the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). Today the KNDO refers to a militia force of local volunteers trained and equipped by the KNLA and incorporated into its battalion and command structure; its members wear uniforms and typically commit to two-year terms of service.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

I said: “People play politics in many ways but I do not understand this. I just tell you as I was told [by the KNU/KNLA]. For us [villagers], if you continue to do this [if the security situation deteriorates further], we will face difficulties like those we have faced [in the past]. We face difficulties because the KNU cannot give us food and you [Tatmadaw] cannot give us food either. You are actually a national army, but your rations are just enough for your soldiers. How can you provide food for local villagers?”

He said: “Right, it’s true that I cannot provide food. I was only allowed to sell leftover rations for a limited period of time.” Then, he asked what challenges my family was facing.

I replied: “I have many challenges but I will not tell you because, even if I tell you, you will not be able to help me.”

**You said that the number of soldiers has increased. Do you know the current number of soldiers [in the area]?**

I don’t know how many soldiers they send each time [per convoy]. Notably, on April 8<sup>th</sup> 2020, they sent 65 soldiers.

**Where are they based?**

I don’t think they are based nearby. They are probably based in Blaw Kyoh and Thu Mweh Hta villages. I do not see them around here. The next time they transported rations [after April 8<sup>th</sup> 2020], 20 soldiers came along again. The next time, they came to find food but they were questioned by Yo [Thai soldiers – the boat on which this group of Tatmadaw soldiers was travelling had stop at a checkpoint on the Thai side of the Moei River],<sup>7</sup> so he [Tatmadaw commander] ordered me to go meet him. I went to their place [camp] and waited until it was dark. He eventually told me [by phone]: “Ko<sup>8</sup> K---, I cannot bring what you ordered. The Thai [soldiers] stopped us and checked everything. They will release us tomorrow so we will arrive tomorrow.” They [Thai soldiers] checked [the Tatmadaw soldiers] for the disease [COVID-19]. On the next day, 16 of them [Tatmadaw soldiers] were released but four of them remained there.

**They told you to ask for permission to use which road?**

It was the Meh Leh Hta old road.

**Where does it go?**

It goes to Haw Ma Daw and Kaw Kaw Hta army camps.

**Do you mean that they stay in Kaw Kaw Hta and go to Haw Ma Daw camp?**

Right.

**How long has this road been closed?**

Since March 8<sup>th</sup> 2020, so he [Tatmadaw commander] told me to ask for permission [to use the road]. He said: “If they won’t allow for more, can you [at least] ask [the KNDO-KNLA] to allow [us to use it] for two days?”

I said: “I will not ask for it anymore. I have nothing more to tell you about the road situation, that is all. As I said, when it is related to politics, civilians should not ask permission for you. [Local leaders] should not do it for you either. Many of your leaders have actually asked permission

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<sup>7</sup> The Moei River forms part of the border between Myanmar and Thailand. Boats travelling on the Moei River are expected to comply with both Thailand and Myanmar checkpoint rules.

<sup>8</sup> Ko is a Burmese title meaning older brother. It can be used to express respect towards relatives and non-relatives alike.

already. If it were going to work, it would have worked already. We, the civilians, cannot step in on this case.”

So he said: “Then, everything is done. I understand now.”

**Do you know the battalion number?**

It is the Light Infantry Battalion [LIB] #407, under Military Operations Command [MOC] #8.

**Do you know the name of the commander?**

I don't know the name of the commander. I will let you know later.

**Do you have any other information to share, such as the challenges faced by villagers?  
How did military activities impact the villagers?**

Do you mean past or current abuses?

**Yes, it can be both.**

In the past, from 2011 to 2015, we faced challenges all the time especially in terms of travelling and working for our livelihood. We could not travel freely. You know, travel to all the places [villages] was restricted at that time.

**How often do they [Tatmadaw] rotate their troops in your area?**

The first group rotated after two months, the second group rotated after four months and the group after that rotated after six months.

**So how long will this current group be staying?**

They will stay for six months.

**Has it been six months?**

No, it has not been six months yet. They will stay until July 16<sup>th</sup> 2020 [...]. After that, they will rotate.

**[...] [H]ave they ever threatened or hurt you?**

They did not threaten or hurt me. They [Tatmadaw] just told me: “Try to make things between both sides [KNU and Tatmadaw] work out for the best. If something happens, the local people will be impacted.” I said: “I cannot handle that. I can only try to [work towards reaching a] compromise if some misunderstanding happens. But when misunderstandings like this happen all the time, I cannot handle it anymore. The higher authorities should handle this.”

**You said that you were ordered to go there [Tatmadaw camp] the day after they fired [mortar shells]. Did they let you go back after talking to you or did they ask you to stay?**

[...] It was on May 19<sup>th</sup> 2020. [...] I met them at their camp in Kaw Kaw Hta. [...] [W]e had to stay for four days. There were nine of us.

**Do you know the names of the nine people who had to stay there for four days?**

Of course I know them. They were Naw R---, Naw A---, Saw B---, Saw T---, Saw E---, Saw O---, Saw N---, Saw W--- and me.

**You were asked to stay for four days, right?**

Yes.

**Were you asked to work during these four days?**

No, we were not asked to work. We only ate and slept. They did not tell us anything. He [a Tatmadaw officer/soldier] just said he was waiting for Deeh Ka, who was on his way. When he arrived, they would discuss about the road issue. Deeh Ka kept postponing his arrival. Finally, he showed up on May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020 and we were released on that day. On that day, Deeh Ka met

with Bo Kalay.<sup>9</sup> Since Deeh Kah had already met with Bo Kalay, he [Tatmadaw commander] said: “Ko K---, you can go for now but you have to sign a letter, as required by the battalion commander.” He also said: “We cannot wait for Deeh Ka anymore.” He told me to solve this again [by talking to the KNU/KNLA]. He said: “Tell them to stop shooting us. I have faced this many times already, so I cannot tolerate it anymore. I also have done things wrong. Now, people will see that I have forced you all to stay here, but I did not do anything to you. The shelling [at civilian areas] was also my fault. It was because I could not tolerate it anymore after I faced it [being attacked by the KNDO-KNLA] several times. I will take the blame.”

### **Who is this Deeh Kah you mentioned?**

Deeh Kah is the BGF [Border Guard Force]<sup>10</sup> leader in the Noh Day area. He is responsible for organising [outreach to local communities], travelling and finding funds. He [Tatmadaw commander] told me: “It would be great if the situation improves, otherwise you [the civilians who live in this area] will be in trouble, for you are between two guns.”

### **Has the KNLA ever disturbed you or forced you [to stay at their camp] like this?**

No, the KNLA has never done that to us. The local KNLA responsible persons are Kyaw Lay and Htee Ber. Whenever they do something, I want them to inform local village heads. I strongly believe that none of the local village heads here will share the information with the Tatmadaw [...]. I believe in the Karen people here. We have heard that people from other areas cannot be trusted much. People in this area can be trusted. I know it because I have been here for more than 20 years already. In the past, young people did not travel that much, but nowadays they travel more. The reason why I want to be notified in advance is because I want villagers to be aware of the situation [conflict]. If the Tatmadaw does not fire mortar shells, it is not a problem but when they do, villagers should know in advance so they can be cautious and warn their children to stop going out [of the village]. They could say: “Do not go out today because the situation is not good.” Otherwise, villagers could get hurt. Civilians are the ones who suffer. In the current situation, they [KNLA] do it [conduct their operations] secretly, and when we question them, they do not admit it. They ambushed the Tatmadaw, but they said they didn't. I told them [KNLA] that we have to improve the situation in the future. Depending on the [security] situation, they have to plant landmines for defensive purposes and/or territory protection. Otherwise, they won't be able to protect themselves because the Tatmadaw numbers are high. Landmines are one of the ways they have to protect themselves [KNLA].

### **Are landmines being planted in this area?**

Of course, landmines are being planted.

### **When did they start using landmines? Are more landmines being planted?**

In previous years. This year, it [the use of landmines] has increased.

### **What are landmines used for?**

They use landmines to target the enemy [Tatmadaw]. If the policy [informal agreement between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA] says that [the delimited area] should be at a 200-yard distance [from the village], they will plant them at a 50-yard distance for defensive purposes. It is also for us [local civilians], not only them. We can work for our livelihoods freely when our territory is protected like this.

### **Do you want to share any other information [...]?**

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<sup>9</sup> Bo is a Burmese title meaning 'officer'.

<sup>10</sup> 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.

We are facing livelihood challenges. We do not harvest enough crops and it is also difficult to go out and get food now. At the moment, I have only one basket of rice left.

**Why is it difficult for you to get food?**

It is because we are stuck between the two groups. The road is closed because of the skirmishes. Transporting rice is not allowed either. Our people [KNLA] do not agree when we go and get it [rice] from D--- village. We were told not to get rice from there. If we do so, we will be punished and they will take action [against us].

**Who would you get rice from in D--- village?**

From the P'Yaw ["Burmans", meaning Bamar shopkeepers in this case]; they sell it. If we get it from there, the bag is full of rice and the price is also a bit high. Since May 19<sup>th</sup>, transporting rice has been completely out of the question. We are not allowed to transport rice yet. The Tatmadaw checked the boats because they suspect we might be transporting things for the KNLA.

**What are your hopes for the future?**

I really hope for something [peace] between the two groups [KNLA and Tatmadaw]. There is nothing else. After the meeting during the eighth month [August], if the voting happens [it is unclear what the interview is referring to], it [sustainable peace] can happen [between the Tatmadaw and KNLA]. However, I think it will not happen easily. The Tatmadaw is not willing to do it either. It has been more than 70 years [the Karen conflict started in 1949], so the Tatmadaw won't grant [freedom for Karen communities] easily. The Myanmar government said that there should only be one military group [army] in the country. If there are many military groups [Ethnic Armed Organisations], the country won't develop. When I ask the Tatmadaw commander about how they will address ethnic grievances, the Tatmadaw says the same. They want only one military.

**What do you think about this idea?**

I don't think it is good. If there is only the Tatmadaw, how can ethnic minorities accept this? It means that they will have to be under someone else's control. Just like armpit hair, it cannot grow much because it is stuck, but it tries to grow.

**Do you think that ethnic minorities will have freedom and rights if there is only one army?**

If the Tatmadaw alone is in control, I think that ethnic minorities will be under their armpit and [will have to] do whatever they ask. We can even say that, if they ask us to clean their ass, we will have to do it. We won't have our own background [administration] anymore. Currently, we still have our military [KNLA] even though we are oppressed. The KNU is not lost yet and they are still resisting. [...]

The current situation is not about misunderstandings. It is about the increasing number of Tatmadaw soldiers. Last year, there was a misunderstanding involving groups #1 and #3 [the interviewee is referring to Tatmadaw units, but KHRG was not able to identify the exact battalion]. They stood guard along the road without informing the local people or local leaders. They also set up more camps in Noh Thay Htuh village. In that case, they were fired at [by the KNLA]. Some of them were also injured because of landmines. They were angry about this and they also opened fire indiscriminately. They fired at nearby places, but not at the village vicinity. After a while, group #3 came to the local area. They also called me over to meet them. When I asked the frontline soldiers [KNLA], I learnt that the Tatmadaw was building new roads and new camps. When I met with the Tatmadaw deputy commander, they asked permission to access the old road. Then, I informed Hpa Dah [KNLA commander] about it. He ultimately allowed the Tatmadaw to use the road. Since then, they have been using the road. This group replaced the Tatmadaw group #3.

**If there is no more information, let's end the interview here.**

Yes, I have no more information.



This photo was taken on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020 in front of a farmhouse in F--- village, Bu Tho Township, Mu Traw District.

According to the interviewee, several mortars, fired by the Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalion #407, Military Operation Command #8, landed on a nearby villager's farm.

*[Photo: KHRG]*

Further background reading on the impacts of militarisation in Mu Traw District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Mu Traw District Situation Update: Anti-Tatmadaw demonstrations and skirmishes between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA, December 2019 to January 2020"](#), September 2020
- ["Mutraw District Incident Report: A villager and his daughter injured by a Tatmadaw mortar shell in Dwe Lo Township, June 2020"](#), July 2020
- ["Mu Traw District Short Update: Destruction of KNPF COVID-19 screening checkpoints by the Tatmadaw and skirmishes between the Tatmadaw and the KNLA in Dwe Lo Township, May 2020"](#), June 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.khrq.org](http://www.khrq.org).

# Mutraw (Hpapun) District

