



## Interview

July 31<sup>st</sup> 2020 / KHRG # 20-8-A1-I1

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## Mergui-Tavoy District Interview: Logging activities by the Myanmar Logging Company threaten local livelihoods, summer of 2019

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*This interview describes events that occurred in A--- village, Ta Naw Th'Ree Township, Mergui-Tavoy District in the summer of 2019. In 2018, the Myanmar Logging Company, acting with permission from the Karen National Union [KNU]<sup>1</sup> District authorities, started logging operations to extract 7,500 tons of timber without the consent of the local people. In January 2019, the company promised to build two roads and a bridge in exchange for the local villagers' permission to conduct the logging. However, after completing its operations, it left the area without fulfilling its promise. According to the interviewee, the logging activities resulted in deforestation, water pollution and loss of grazing land. He also indicated that past logging activities had made the area more prone to floods.<sup>2</sup>*

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### Interview | A--- village, P'Wa area, Ta Naw Th'Ree Township [Tanintharyi] Township, Mergui-Tavoy District (January 2020)

**Name:** Saw<sup>3</sup> B---

**Gender:** Male

**Age:** 37

**Religion:** Christian

**Ethnicity:** Karen

**Family Status:** Married

[...]

#### **What do the villagers do for a living here?**

They just do plantation agriculture, [plains] farming and hill farming in A--- village.

#### **Does anyone work for a company?**

Yes, there are some people who work for companies.

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<sup>1</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.

<sup>2</sup> The present document is based on information received in January 2020. It was provided by a community member in Megui-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. The parts in square brackets are explanations added by KHRG staff.

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

### **Do you know about any human rights violations that happened in the village?**

There is one issue that I know of. The Myanmar Logging Company conducted logging from 2018 to 2019 in C---, D--- Mountain and in the A--- village's forest. They did not inform [local villagers] or have a consultation meeting with the local villagers about their activities before they started. They did not ask permission from the villagers either. They just came in and set up a barbed wire fence [around the logging area]. We went to question them because they did not inform us about this. They said they were from the Myanmar Logging Company and they had to produce timber for domestic use. U<sup>4</sup> Ko Ko, the company manager in charge of this logging project, [is the one who] said that. He apologised because he had made a mistake [by not asking permission from the local villagers]. He wanted the villagers to allow him to continue the logging because he had to log 7,500 tons of timber.

Subsequently, three villages, A---, E--- and F---, organised a meeting with the villagers in the A-- - hall [in January 2019]. On the meeting day, the manager U Ko Ko, his assistant, and his other subordinates who were conducting the logging [operations] attended the meeting. He [U Ko Ko] told [the villagers] about the logging and how many tons of logs he wanted. He also asked the villagers to help him by allowing him to conduct the logging. The villagers from the three villages did not allow it. He said: *'Please help me because I have a responsibility to do it.'* He spoke to us in Karen. We talked about it the whole day, until it got dark. We had to use the motor [generator] to get electricity. The people from the company and the villagers just talked back and forth. They [the company] could not get permission from the villagers. However, they were going to do it anyway, even if the villagers did not allow them to. Therefore, the local authorities from the three villages had to talk and negotiate. We specified the areas in which they could conduct the logging. However, they even logged near the villagers' hill farms.

We asked them to build a road from C--- to G--- in return. We want the local villagers who are doing hill farming and plantation agriculture to be able to transport their products, such as betel nut, with motorbikes. We did not ask them to build a cement [road] or a very good quality road, just to level the ground in order to be able to travel. However, they did not do it for us. At first, we did not trust them either. Then, we asked them who would take responsibility for building this road. U Ko Ko referred the responsibility to build the road to U Tun Wai from Myeik town. U Tun Wai took about ten minutes to think about this road construction [request] before he agreed to it. He promised to take responsibility for building this road [connecting C---, G--- and A--- villages]. We said: *"We allow you to conduct the logging and you have to build the road for us, for the benefit of both sides."*

There is a river [P'Wa River] so we also need a bridge to be able to travel during the rainy season. We also asked them to build a bridge for us. U Tun Wai thought about this for about ten minutes and then he called his boss U Maung La Than. He [said that they] will build the bridge for the villagers and assess how much it would cost. They [the company] estimated that the bridge from F--- would cost 5 or 6 million kyats [USD 3,670.70 or 4,404.84],<sup>5</sup> and they also took into account every [other] expense they might have to pay [to build the bridge]. However, we thought that it would not cost that much because they could get the logs or the wood from here [the village], and they also had their boats to carry the concrete blocks and other [materials]. So I thought the cost might not be very high. They agreed to build the bridge on the P'Wa River for us. We want a strong bridge to be able to travel during the rainy season.

In the end, they did not build the road or the bridge. We asked them to build [widen and level] the road - two different roads. One is from C--- to A---. Then, the villagers from F--- also asked them to build a road to F--- village [by extending the existing road] from H--- village to I--- [village] [so that] the road goes straight to F--- village. They [the company] said they constructed

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<sup>4</sup> U is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

<sup>5</sup> All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the July 29<sup>th</sup> 2020 official market rate of 1,362.40 kyats to USD 1.

and levelled the road there, but even motorbikes cannot use it because the road is so rough. They just did it [level the road] there and they did not do anything in C--- and A--- villages. They did not build the road or the bridge. U Ko Ko and U Tun Wai did not take responsibility [for building the road and the bridge], there was no accountability.

The [KNU] Ta Naw Th'Ree Township administrator, Pa Doh<sup>6</sup> J---, and [KNU Township vice secretary] Pa Doh K--- attended the meeting between the villagers, the company managers and the workers. They [KNU leaders] were the middlemen who brokered peace between the villagers and the company. We accepted this [these conditions] at the village level. I asked the Ta Naw Th'Ree Township administrator, Pa Doh J---: "*What will you do if they do not follow the agreement?*" He said: "*I will take responsibility for it if they don't follow it.*" In the end, he did not take responsibility and we have not heard about [him] or anything from him [anymore]. They [the company] already sold the logs and did not do anything for the villagers.

The areas where they did the logging are reserved forest areas. We accepted their request because they also agreed to do something for our villages. We got angry and [were] unsatisfied with them, and we do not want them to conduct logging again. These are the areas where we keep trees, plants and bamboos to grow, and [maintain the forests] for our next generations [...]. The logging did not bring any benefits for the villagers. Thousands of small plants and small trees died after they cut down one big tree. Can we think about how many small plants and small trees died after they logged 7,500 tons of timber? The consequences from the logging are that small plants and trees have died and the river got drier. We were not enthusiastic about allowing them to conduct the logging, but we ultimately had to [agree to] it. They did not provide what the villagers needed.

**What is U Ko Ko's ethnic group?**

U Ko Ko said he is Karen and Christian.

**Where does he live?**

He lives in the upper part of Myanmar.

**Is he from Yangon, Mandalay or Myawaddy?**

He is from Mandalay.

**What about U Tun Wai?**

U Tun Wai is from Myeik [Mergui-Tavoy District].

**What are the problems that the villagers are facing because of the deforestation?**

A few days after they cut down the trees, the water became dirty because the elephants played and pooped in the water. The villagers who drank the water from the river vomited and got diarrhoea. The villagers could not get clean water because there were almost 30 elephants, which the company had brought to carry the logs. The villagers who get water from the stream could access clean water but the villagers who get water from the main river got dirty water. No one died but local villagers got sick after drinking water from the river.

**Do you know how many villagers got sick? Were they children, adults or elders?**

Most of them were children, about four or five children.

**Is there anyone who had to go to the hospital?**

No, no one needed to go to the hospital, but they went to see the health workers in the village.

**How many people in total?**

[No answer].

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<sup>6</sup> Pa Doh is a title meaning 'governor' or 'minister,' within the government or military.

**What kind of trees did the company log?**

Their main objective was to log Khaw Tho [resin tree]. However, they also logged Chaw Paw Ngah and Chaw Kweh [thingan].

**How do you call Chaw Paw Ngah and Chaw Kweh [trees] in Burmese?**

Chaw Paw Ngah is S'Gah Thaung and Chaw Kweh is Thingan in Burmese.

**How far from Htee Th'Day village is the logging area [...]?**

It is 30 miles [48.3 km] away from A--- village.

**How long does it take by foot?**

It would take three hours or three and a half hours.

**What about by motorbike?**

It would take 40 minutes to reach the base of the mountain. It would [then] take 30 to 40 minutes to climb the mountain and reach the logging area.

**I heard you say that they would replant the trees they cut down. What about that?**

They said they would plant small teak trees [to replace] the big trees they cut down. They brought them but they haven't planted them yet. They just put them in the bushes so some have already died.

**Will they plant them by themselves, or will they ask the villagers to plant them?**

We don't know about that. We just heard that they would replant them. I am not sure whether the company's workers will plant them or not. I even heard that the villagers will have to plant them but we did not agree to that.

**Did they limit the number of trees they would replant?**

No, they didn't.

**Were there any meetings with the KNU after the company left? As you mentioned, the Township authorities participated in the meeting with the company. Did the KNU township leaders say anything?**

No, there was no meeting. The company had already logged 40 or 50 tons of timber when we found out [about their activities]. The Ta Naw Th'Ree [KNU] Township leaders said: "*Let them do it.*" They were like a bridge between the company and the villagers. We asked the Township administrator: "*Are they reliable? What will you do if it does not happen? [If they do not build the road and the bridge]*" He said: "*I will take responsibility for it if it does not happen.*" The Township administrator guaranteed it so, as local villagers, we also gave permission to the company [because we trust the Township administrator]. However, the company left after they conducted the logging. Since then, we haven't seen anyone coming to build the road and the bridge [or] to update or let us know about the situation.

**So no update, no information... Did they bring elephants?**

Yes, they did.

**How many elephants did they bring?**

There were around 20 elephants. They brought the elephants from Taw Oo [Toungoo].

**Do you know the owners of the elephants?**

No, I do not.

**What are the benefits and disadvantages of the logging?**

If we compare the benefits to the disadvantages, there were no benefits for the three villages around here.

**What are the disadvantages?**

There are many disadvantages for the local villagers. There is the deforestation, because they cut [down big trees], and thousands of small plants or trees have died. The river is also drying up and the climate is changing in the local areas. It became a problem and a concern for the local villagers.

**Is there any flooding in the area because of [previous] logging [activities]?**

Two or three years after the logging activities were conducted [the interviewee seems to be referring to previous logging activities that are not related to this particular case]; there were floods in the local villages. We had to get rice donations from outsiders for the local villagers who faced the floods.

**Were there any flooding issues in the past?**

Yes, there were but not that many. For example, if it rains for one, two or three hours nowadays, the rainwater will take two or three days to dry out.

**It became a disaster for the local villagers. What are the problems or difficulties the local villagers are facing?**

A--- village is located near the river source so some of the local villagers are working there. When the flooding happened, they could not come back to their houses and the paddy crops were destroyed by the floodwater. The local people face many problems, including health issues.

**How did the local villagers solve the problems they faced?**

The local villagers just had to help each other to be able to eat during the floods, because they could not go anywhere. The villagers did not dare to travel on boats or bamboo rafts either. Many things were floating around during the floods, such as bamboo, trash, and wood. You might have gotten hurt because of them.

**[...] What were the most common diseases among local villagers during the floods?**

During the floods, the most common diseases among local villagers were malaria and headache.

**[...] [T]he local villagers who did not have enough food [rice] in their house asked their neighbours for food [borrowed food from their neighbours]. Am I right?**

Yes, the whole area was flooded and even if we could see each other, we could not cross the water [river].

**Did the Myanmar government or the Myanmar police investigate the logging issue?**

Yes, they did. Before the company [started its logging operations], they [the Tatmadaw soldiers] came, patrolled around the areas and monitored the situation. They are from the Yay Phyu Operations Command and they came to L--- and to our village. Then, they went to the other villages.

**Did the company have a permission letter from Nay Pyi Taw [the Myanmar government], from the KNU and from the District [authorities]?**

Yes, they did. They showed it to us.

**So they had a permission letter from both Nay Pyi Taw and the KNU.**

Yes, from the KNU. Pa Doh J--- said: "*We will just negotiate for you.*" He said we could not handle the company by ourselves. It [the permission] came directly from the [KNU] District authorities.

**Was it from the KNU District authorities or from the Myanmar government?**

It was from the KNU District authorities.

**How do the villagers feel about this logging issue? And what do you personally think about it?**

The local villagers from F---, A--- and E--- villages did not want the logging project. There will be deforestation and the river will dry up. The animals will go extinct if they have no or less places to live. Therefore, I can see that the villagers do not want any logging, planting of palm oil trees [large-scale agricultural projects] or development projects by companies. As a leader, I do not want companies to implement development projects in the local areas. The reason why I do not want the companies [to operate in the area] is because there are more disadvantages than benefits for the local people. If we cut down a tree, the river will dry up and the trees will die. The authorities should also know about the consequences [of the logging], refuse permission to the companies and help us take care of our environment in A--- village, P'Wah area.

[...]

**Do you want to add anything more [...]?**

I would like to report to our KNU about the company's logging activities in our area. We do not want that [kind of] activity. The animals do not have a place to graze [anymore] so they find food in our hill farms and [plains] farms. They eat our paddies, plants and small trees. This created livelihood difficulties for us. Therefore, we want the KNU or the Myanmar government to help us solve this problem.

**So you mean that there is no place for the animals to graze and they destroyed the local villagers' farms and plantation areas. Do you want to add anything more?**

We mostly rely on our KNU and its different departments to help us solve these kinds of problems. What we are most afraid of is companies coming to do mining, logging and gold mining and taking all the natural resources from us. If the water [river] dries up, there will be more diseases, more pollution and more people will die [because of the diseases]. Therefore, we do not want our KNU leaders to give permission to the companies and rich men [businessmen]. We want our KNU leaders to support us more. We have rights and we can express our feelings freely nowadays.

They [the companies] should get permission from the villagers and village leaders first, regardless of whether their activities are good or not because we have our leaders in the village. The village leaders could talk and have meetings with the villagers. The villagers could give permission to the company or not. We have plans to talk openly because now we have more freedom to express our feelings. Therefore, I would like to tell our KNU leaders to help us solve this logging problem. The company extracted 7,500 tons of logs from our area. There is no accountability regarding this issue, neither from the company nor from the KNU. As for the KNU, Pa Doh J--- took responsibility for this issue. We would like him to fulfil his promise and take responsibility to solve this issue.

**Is there anything else?**

No, I do not have anything more [to add].

**Can I use this information? Can I take your photo?**

Yes, you can use the information but you can decide whether it is good to use the photos or not.

Further background reading on the impact of economic activities in Southeast Myanmar 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)
- [“Hpa-an District Situation Update: Landmine contamination, land confiscation, extortion and pollution from mining activities, January to May 2019”](#), (March 2020)
- [“Doo Tha Htoo District Interviews: Water pollution caused by a Tatmadaw-run cement factory, October 2019”](#), (March 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).

# Mergui-Tavoy (Tanintharyi) District

