



Interview

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Mergui-Tavoy District Interview: Security forces kill peaceful anti-coup protesters in Dawei Town, February 2021

This interview describes events that have been occurring in Dawei Town, T'Naw Th'Ree [Tanintharyi] Township, Mergui-Tavoy District since early February 2021. The interviewee shared his perspectives on the February 1st 2021 military coup d'état¹ and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).² He also recounted his participation in anti-coup protests during which the security forces used lethal force against peaceful demonstrators.³

Interview | Saw⁴ A---, T'Naw Th'Ree Township, Mergui-Tavoy District (March 2nd 2021)

How did you react when you first heard that the military had taken power?

We have been protesting for almost a month.

When did you start joining the protests [in Dawei Town]?

I first joined on February 3rd 2021. [...]

How about other people? How did the local villagers react?

The situation in the villages is still stable. But protests grew stronger on February 22nd 2021.

Did the protests start on February 3rd 2021?

Yes.

How many people have joined the protests?

If I had to guess, over a thousand people.

¹ On February 1st 2021, the Burma Army deposed the democratically elected government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military proclaimed a year-long state of emergency and transferred power to Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar's Armed Forces. Based on unproven fraud allegations, the Tatmadaw invalidated the landslide victory of the NLD in the November 2020 General Election and stated it would hold new elections at the end of the state of emergency. The coup d'état occurred the day before the Parliament of Myanmar was due to swear in the members elected during the 2020 election. Elected President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained, along with ministers, their deputies and members of Parliament.

² On February 2nd 2021, healthcare workers across Myanmar spearheaded a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and initiated labour strikes to protest against the February 2021 military coup. The movement quickly spread to other branches of public service, eventually turning into a nationwide, large-scale civil disobedience campaign.

³ The present document is based on information received in March 2021. It was provided by a community member in Mergui-Tavoy 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.

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

Over a thousand people.

Yes. Not only Karen people, other ethnic groups were also included.

Are the protestors only from Dawei Town? Did local villagers from the villages join too?

Some villagers joined the protests. But there were more participants from local villages on February 22nd and 28th 2021.

Which villages and village tracts⁵ are they from?

They are from A--- village and B--- village. People in Dawei Town protest every day.

How many villages joined the protest?

If we have to count the villages, it is more difficult. It will be easier if we count the townships.

Yes, can you please tell me how many village tracts and from which townships?

They are from Ler Doh Soe and K'Ser Doh townships. [...]

What do you think about the CDM? What is your opinion?

I think it is good. Some of the [government] offices are closed already. For example, there are no doctors or nurses at the public hospital.

In Dawei Town?

Yes, in Dawei Town. Doctors are the most important, but there are no doctors now. Therefore, no patients go to the hospital. My wife is a public servant but she doesn't go to her office. There are less people who go to the office, so they are afraid [of retaliation] and do not go to the office anymore.

So no one goes to the office now.

There are some people [public servants] who sneak in and out or go to the office in secret. However, they go to the office at 9 am and come back at 12 pm.

What is the percentage? Are there more people [public servants] engaged in the CDM or going to the office?

Around 20 or 30% of the people.

Do you mean that 20 or 30% of the people are going to the office?

Yes.

How many times have you joined the protests?

I joined every day. [...]

How did you hear about the protests in Dawei and what made you decide to [join]?

We did not hope for this military coup. We heard that they [National League for Democracy (NLD)⁶ and Tatmadaw]⁷ had a meeting but it did not go well. Later we heard that the military had taken over power. We thought that if we stayed home, it would not change anything.

⁵ A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

⁶ The National League for Democracy (NLD) is the political party that governed Burma/Myanmar from 2016 to January 2021. Led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD won landslide victories in the 2015 and 2020 General Elections. The NLD government was deposed by the Burma Army in the February 2021 Myanmar coup d'état, after which elected President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained, along with ministers, their deputies and members of Parliament.

⁷ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

Therefore, I decided to join the protest. The most important thing is that we do not want to give the power to the military.

Did you hear [about the coup] from the news?

Yes, I also heard it from the news, and people I know contacted me. We informed each other and those we know.

Who attended the meeting?

The NLD and the Tatmadaw.

When was their meeting?

I don't remember quite well, but it was in late January 2021.

Did you travel alone when you joined the protests in Dawei, or with other people?

I went with other people.

Did your [fellow] villagers join the protest?

I am from C--- village but I joined with my friends from the town [Dawei Town].

How about C--- villagers, did they join?

No one from the village has joined the protests yet. Most of the protestors are from the town.

Were you concerned for your safety before joining the protests?

Yes, I have to be concerned for my safety. On February 22nd 2021, I was exposed to tear gas. I faced the police. However, it was good that I was wearing a helmet and a mask. I always carry a water bottle with me. When it happened, I washed my face, so it got better.

Who threw the tear gas?

The police did, but there were also Tatmadaw soldiers among them.

Did they throw them [tear gas canisters] at the people?

Yes. I was able to recognise the Dawei Town police, but the police officers I saw were not from Dawei Town. They don't look like they are the Dawei Town police.

Can you describe in details what happened at the demonstration on Sunday [February 28th 2021]?

Yes, I joined the protest on Sunday. We had to disperse and run [for cover] early on that day, at 8:30 am because they started firing warning shots. But at 10 am, they shot live rounds [at the protesters who were still on the streets]. One person was shot and people tried to send him to the public hospital. The public hospital was closed so they tried to send him to a private hospital. However, he did not make it. He just died on the way.

Why did he die?

Because he was shot with a live bullet.

What did the police or Tatmadaw soldiers use when they fired warning shots? Did they use rubber bullets or real bullets?

They used everything: rubber bullets, tear gas and also real bullets. Those who died were shot with real bullets.

How many have died since the beginning of the protests until now?

There were not many people in the protest [in the beginning]. However, there were more people on February 22nd and February 28th 2021.

Yes. Among them, how many civilians have died?

Five have died in Dawei, and seven in Myeik. I have also heard that one more died yesterday [March 1st 2021] in Dawei.

Were there any instances of torture or abuse?

Yes. They arrested 15 people in Dawei. But they released two of them because those two were underage [under 18].

When did they arrest these people? Were they arrested on the same day?

I am not sure about that but my friend told me that, up until yesterday [March 1st 2021], they had arrested 15 people but two of them were released. Those who are [still in custody] will have to go to court on March 12th 2021.

Do lawyers help those who were arrested?

There is a Dawei CDM support group. It includes lawyers. [...]

Did anything happen on Sunday? Any brutal incidents?

It was the worst day. They shot [both live and rubber bullets] at civilians. People had to run because they were afraid. Some people were injured because they were shot at.

Did anyone die or get injured?

Five people died on Sunday.

How about the injured?

Yes, there were a lot of them, including Karen people. As far as I know, over 50 people were injured.

Do you think you will join the next protests?

Yes, I will but I will also have to check the security [situation]. Our safety is also important.

Do you plan to take part [in a leadership role] in future demonstrations against the military?

No, I don't. Taking care of our own security is the most important. If the situation is not good and if we have to run, we just do it. There is no leader.

What is your perspective on the situation the country is facing?

In my opinion, the NLD and the Tatmadaw should collaborate. In this situation, [neither] the Tatmadaw nor the civilians...can step back anymore. Therefore, I think they need to meet and talk about this.

Do you mean that the Tatmadaw and the civilians need to meet and talk about this?

The NLD and the Tatmadaw should meet, and the civilians should also be included in the meeting. I think [that if] they can talk face to face, it will be better. This is the first option. The second option would be a UN intervention [to address] the situation in Myanmar. But I don't think the UN should or needs to intervene just yet. There are over 50 million civilians, but there are only around 500,000 Tatmadaw soldiers. Therefore, we do not need to be afraid yet.

As you mentioned earlier, there were over 1,000 protestors. Are those the demonstrators that protest every day? What about the days you mentioned, February 22nd and February 28th? Was there the same number of protestors?

No, not the same number as usual. There might have been 100,000 protestors⁸ on February 22nd 2021, and there were more than 100,000 protestors on February 28th 2021.

⁸ KHRG was not able to confirm this figure.

So those two days saw the highest number of protestors?

Yes. Sunday saw the highest number of protestors. Our Karen people also joined the protest on that day. There were young Karen who could not join the protest on Sunday because they went to church. [...]

Do you think the civilians or the civilian government will regain power?

I think they are going to regain power. To be honest, I do not fully support the NLD and neither do the ethnic people [minorities]. However, they should regain power. Later on, they should meet with the ethnic groups and talk. [I think that] power should be restored to the NLD.. I believe that they will get it back [regain power].

So you prefer the NLD government over the Tatmadaw ruling the country.

[...] I just think it will be better if the NLD rules the country. We have more freedom to talk when the NLD government rules the country. They do not have the weapons, but the Tatmadaw does. So if they rule the country, the situation will go back as it was in 1997 or 1998.

Have you experienced a military coup before?

I experienced the Shwe War Yaung Revolution [Saffron Revolution, August to October 2007]. Later, I participated in the electricity movement in Dawei Town.

What do you mean by the electricity movement?

We were calling for a reduction in the price of electricity in Dawei Town. The gas is produced in our areas [electricity plants are fuelled by gas]. However, the price for one unit of electricity is higher than in other areas.

When did this movement happen?

I don't remember exactly. [...]

What do you expect from the CDM and protests?

My expectation is very simple. As I usually say: *"We do not need to ask for democracy. Democracy is in the hands of the people."* Therefore, they [Tatmadaw] should give democracy back to the people. But now, it seems like they are robbing or stealing democracy from the people. Actually, we do not need to ask them for democracy because democracy is ours. It is public, so they should hand it back to the people. This is the people's power.

I have asked you many questions. Do you have anything more to add?

I would like to say that the most important thing is: *"Don't get discouraged"*. Not everyone needs to go out and protest every day. We should take turns protesting. We won't be able to stand strong if we go out every day. People are already getting tired now, so we should take turns. If we show our power, they [the Tatmadaw] might not be able to stand strong.

Do you want the people not to get discouraged?

Yes. We should stand strong. Then, we need to protect ourselves well. Many people have died already. We should prepare ourselves, [and think about] how to protect [ourselves] if they do something to us. We should plan ahead for that. [...] Otherwise, we will keep losing lives.

What else?

There is nothing special. However, I think that, if they [Tatmadaw] feel some pressure from the ethnic armed groups, they will feel a bit nervous. It also depends on the [Karen National Union (KNU)⁹ and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)]¹⁰ brigade. Our brigade [Brigade #4] remains passive.

⁹ 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

Does the KNU/KNLA from Brigade #4 participate and protest with the local people?

When I talked to some people from Dawei Town, they told me that they need the ethnic armed groups to stand with them and help them. [...]

[...] Do the ethnic armed groups do that?

No, not yet. The other day I heard [a rumour] that the KNU/KNLA had taken over the hospital. I went there, but I did not see any KNU/KNLA soldiers.

Are the schools closed now?

Yes, the schools and the [government] offices are closed now.

As you mentioned earlier, is the public hospital the only one that is closed? How about other hospitals?

There is only one public hospital in Dawei Town. However, other private hospital and clinics are still open. But the fees are higher now [since the coup].

What livelihood problems are the local people facing because of this political situation?

There are many problems now. People working at [government] offices do not get their salaries. Some do not go and take their salaries. I am looking for a new job but there is no hiring at this time. There is no office that is opened. Our country is mainly doing agriculture [most of our workforce is involved in agriculture]. The local villagers are planting but they cannot sell their products. The merchants do not have money to pay for the products either because the banks are closed. Both the businessmen and the local people are facing a difficult situation. There are many consequences related [to the political situation].

How do they [local people] solve their livelihood problems?

People from town have to borrow money from each other, [that is,] from people who have it. However, the local villagers face less livelihood problems because they can grow vegetables in their garden and they can eat what they grow since they have lands, houses and gardens. In Dawei Town, the prices are higher now. For example, 1 kg of beef used to cost 10,000 kyats [USD 7.05],¹¹ but now it has increased to 14,000 kyats [USD 9.87]. The other problem is that people working at sea cannot work. They do not have money [to cover their operational costs] so they cannot work. The workers now have to rest for two months. The businessmen do not have money to pay the workers either.

Did they ask their workers to rest?

Yes, they do not have money to run their businesses. There are other expenses, like food costs and payment [salaries] for the workers. They cannot cover them so they told their workers to rest for a while [temporary lay off].

What else?

There is nothing else. Some people are already afraid because they saw and heard about the shooting [of the protesters] the other day. However, there are still people who are going to protest. Not many, but still. They do not gather in big groups or in the same place, they just protest in their own section. Some people just hit steel [usually pots and pans] in front of their houses. Some people are afraid so they do not dare to hit steel anymore.

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.

¹⁰ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

¹¹ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the March 5th 2021 official market rate.

Do they [security forces] go and arrest people in their houses?

Yes. They arrested some people inside their own houses. They also put pressure [on people involved in the CDM]. For example, the education administrator told staff to go back to the office and to come to work. Staff members who joined the CDM are afraid since they do not go to work. They do not dare to go and get their salary. Some people do not want to take their salaries anymore.

Were staff members threatened?

I do not remember the date but there were people who threw fire [incendiary weapons] on houses, so some houses burned.¹² [...] People are now more careful at night and they lock their houses carefully. Nowadays, we have to get up and check whenever we hear the dog barking or any other noise. [...] I think you've already heard about that, but they arrested one of the DVB [Democratic Voice of Burma] journalists.

Thank you so much for your time.

Yes, thank you.

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.

¹² See Myanmar Times, "[Myanmar enacts new privacy laws as public unrest escalates](#)", February 2021.

Mergui-Tavoy (Tanintharyi) District

