



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

November 28, 2017/ KHRG #17-17-A2-I1

Toungoo Interview: Saw A---, November 2016

This Interview with Saw A--- describes events occurring in Htantabin (Htaw Ta Htoo) Township, Toungoo (Taw Oo) District, on November 15th 2016, including development, land seizures, healthcare, education, livelihood, past abuses and perspectives on youth empowerment, and the KNU and NLD governments.

- *Wealthy individual and private landowner, U Than Htay, confiscated 200 acres of land from Htee Pa Loh villagers, starting in 2006-2007 in Htantabin Township, Toungoo District. Although their lands were confiscated, some were later returned. Villagers have also been continuing to work on the plantations which have yet to be returned, showing that they oppose the land confiscation.*
 - *Saw A--- stated that people in his village contract diseases, mostly malaria. There is no clinic in his village but government health workers come to give vaccinations once a month. When villagers are severely ill, they are sent to Toungoo Hospital but the medical fees are expensive and are difficult to afford for most villagers.*
 - *Saw A--- returned to his original village in 2004, after a long period of displacement which started around 1993 and 1994, when the Tatmadaw came to attack his village. The villagers were first displaced to Magyi Kone village. They later moved to Na Ga Mauk village after Magyi Kone village was burnt down by the Tatmadaw.*
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Interview | Saw A---, (male, 33), B--- village, Htaw Ta Htoo Township, Toungoo District (November 2016)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Toungoo District on November 15th 2016 and is presented below translated exactly as it was received, save for minor edits for clarity and

security.¹ This interview was received along with other information from Toungoo District, including two other interviews, 61 photographs and 2 video clips.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Hill Farmer

Position: Village head

What is your name?

Saw A---

How old are you?

33 years old

Where do you live?

B--- village.

What is your ethnicity?

I am Karen.

What is your religion?

I am Christian.

What is your position/occupation in the village?

I am a village head and I farm hill plantations.

Can you tell me about the challenges/problems you encounter as a village head?

¹ KHRG trains community members in southeastern Burma/Myanmar to document individual human rights abuses using a standardised reporting format; conduct interviews with other villagers; and write general updates on the situation in areas with which they are familiar. When conducting interviews, community members are trained to use loose question guidelines, but also to encourage interviewees to speak freely about recent events, raise issues that they consider to be important and share their opinions or perspectives on abuse and other local dynamics.

² In order to increase the transparency of KHRG methodology and more directly communicate the experiences and perspectives of villagers in southeastern Burma/Myanmar, KHRG aims to make all field information received available on the KHRG website once it has been processed and translated, subject only to security considerations. For additional reports categorised by Type, Issue, Location and Year, please see the Related Readings component following each report on KHRG's website.

I do not currently see any problems. But in the past, we had problems regarding our livelihood. We had to flee from our village because of the Burma/Myanmar military's [Tatmadaw's]³ abuse and mistreatment of civilians, which lasted about ten years. Between 2007-14⁴, we came back to our village and we have seen that the situation has improved, under the administration [of the Burma/Myanmar government].

For their livelihoods, villagers rely upon the land, especially on agriculture and plantations. Kaung Myanmar Aung Company⁵ arbitrarily confiscated our land, so now the villagers find it difficult to secure their livelihood. One more thing that we have to look at is the standard of healthcare. Currently, we send patients from our village to [the hospital in] town [Toungoo]. We do not have any clinics in our village and this is a weakness for the village.

Another issue that just happens among the village is that, being a village head I sometimes face various problems within the affairs of our village. Sometimes villagers obey but sometimes they are disobedient.

You have mentioned about Kaung Myanmar Aung Company, when did they enter this area?

They entered in this area in 2006. Related to land confiscation, there is still another case [I want to mention]. The wealthy individual and private landowner, U Than Htay, confiscated 200 acres of land from B--- villagers, starting in 2006-2007. We gathered together, went to our land and continued our regular work on the fields [although they had confiscated the land]. They told us to stop but we continued our job [farming on the plantations]. Actually, they should have brought the case to court but they didn't. We said we are just working on our land so they stopped the process [of land confiscation] until now. However, we still see that the tax receipts are coming [we have to continue paying tax]. But, they do not have any specific record or list to compensate for the lands [to manage taxation payments].

³ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military throughout KHRG's 25 year reporting period. The Myanmar military were commonly referred to by villagers in KHRG research areas as SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) from 1988 to 1997 and SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) from 1998 to 2011, which were the Tatmadaw-proclaimed names of the military government of Burma. Villagers also refer to Tatmadaw in some cases as simply "Burmese" or "Burmese soldiers".

⁴ The exact date is unknown by the interview.

⁵ Kaung Myanmar Aung Company (KMAC) or Kaung Myanmar Aung Group of Companies is a Myanmar-owned business group with investments in teak plantations in Toungoo District, and mining, agriculture, shipping, construction and real estate development within Myanmar. Their chairman is Mr Khin Maung Aye. KMAC have been implicated in land confiscation cases in southeast Myanmar which have included threats to villagers who were customary owners of the lands, see "[Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi and Htantabin townships, November 2014 to February 2015](#)," July 2015. Affected villagers held protests against the company in 2015 and early 2016 in order to demand the return of their lands, see "[Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi and Htantabin townships, November 2015 to January 2016](#)," July 2016. For information on a similar case with KMAC in Pyin Oo Lwin Township, Mandalay Division, see "[Presidential adviser sues 13 farmers for trespassing](#)," Myanmar Times, September 2nd, 2013.

So the 200 acres that had been confiscated was returned and the villagers could work on their lands⁶. Yes?

Yes, they are now currently working on their own land [not formally returned]. There were two areas of land that were confiscated from two villages, C--- village and B--- village.

How many acres of B--- villagers' lands were confiscated by Kaung Myanmar Aung Company?

If we look at only our villagers' lands, there was a high amount of territory, around 100 acres. But, the land that they [Kaung Myanmar Aung Company] used was only about two to three acres. They needed to expand but they did not continue. They left the lands that they had used. We know that Thara Doh Htoo⁷ helped us with that case, so that they [Kaung Myanmar Aung Company] did not continue to use and expand their [seized] land.

Is the land that the Kuang Myanmar Aung Company left [all] villagers' lands?

Yes.

Did they provide any compensation to the villagers whose land was confiscated?

They didn't compensate at all. We have not received any action [form of compensation].

Was only B--- village affected by the land confiscation of Kaung Myanmar Aung and U Than Htay? What about other villages?

No, it also included C--- village.

What about other villages?

No

Do the villagers of B--- village, especially those who own land, have to have land tax receipts or use the land application form system?

No, we don't have. We only have the 'Land Use Permission'⁸ [form] that has been used since a long time ago.

Regarding this, we would like to know whether the villagers tried to get a land application form.

⁶ Information on whether the land was formally returned is currently unavailable.

⁷ Thara Doh Htoo is a secretary of Land Restitution Committee, founded by the KNU. He is also involved in the Burma/Myanmar government but is inform about his exact role is currently unavailable..

⁸ This is one of the many forms required by land owners to own and work on land.

Yes, we tried. We have proposed [asked the government for the land application form] for two years already, but we have not received any answers or information until now. The case has been known since my uncle Saw D--- was the village head⁹.

[In your opinion] why do you think they have not given any response on this issue?

I think they did not want to give the opportunity to the villagers [to work on their lands] because the companies are conducting business on those lands.

Regarding another topic, does the village have any clinic that has been provided or supported by the Burma/Myanmar government?

No, but we have monthly vaccinations [provided by the Burma/Myanmar government]. Currently one villager is attending midwife training. However, financial problems are an issue [regarding the provision of medical treatment in the village].

What sort of sicknesses do people usually suffer from in this area?

Mostly they suffer from malaria.

We know that the village doesn't have clinics or health workers, so when the villagers are seriously sick what do the villagers arrange [for treatment] and where do they send the patients?

We send [them] to Taw Oo [Toungoo] Civil Hospital.

Is there any discrimination [regarding treatment] because of a patient's financial background?

Personally as I see it, there is no discrimination. However, it is hard to get treatment for serious sicknesses if people do not have enough money.

What about the education [facilities] here? What is the maximum standard the school has?

We have five Standards¹⁰ in this village.

Was the school established by the Burma/Myanmar government or by the villagers?

The school was initiated by the villagers in the beginning, but it was later transferred to the [Burma/Myanmar] government's administration.

⁹ More detailed information as to when this was is currently unavailable.

¹⁰ A standard refers to a school year in the education system of Burma/Myanmar. The basic education system has a 5-4-2 structure. Primary school runs from Standard 1 to Standard 5, lower secondary school are Standard 6 to Standard 9, and upper secondary school is Standard 10 to Standard 11.

After the [Burma/Myanmar] government took over responsibility for the school, has the school been fully supported each year?

I don't know about the past but until now I haven't seen any teachers asking for money from villagers for school materials, because we know that the Education Department Officer is supportive and everything is going well [with the school]. Moreover, the Burma/Myanmar government has established a school for us and we have also built one self-funded school by ourselves. Our self-funded school's purpose is to show the white colour.¹¹

Do the student's parents have the financial capability to send their children to school?

No.

How do they try to manage to send their children to school?

Local villagers depend on farming and the issues arise after their children have finished Standard five in the village, because they have to continue their further studies in a town [with a high school] where they have no relatives. As well, the parents find it difficult to send their children to a dormitory because of their financial problems, which is another problem. Parents do try [to send their children to school] but they do not make much money [because of their financial hardship], so children are not able to go to school.

According to these circumstances, do you mean that only a small amount of children, who have finished Standard Five in the village, can continue their study in the town?

Yes, just a few. If we look at people amongst our village, there is still no one who has finished Standard Ten (high school) because the school is far from their home village. Moreover, their parents cannot afford all the expenses since they have to send their children to the town, where prices are high.

What are the main jobs that the local people are doing?

We mainly earn our livelihood by farming. And now, some people work on rubber plantations. But, the main livelihood we have is farming.

Overall do all the villagers have enough food to eat each year?

No, they don't.

How do they manage to get enough food to eat?

The villagers usually go to work outside of the village such as working as a mahout,¹² logging trees and finding cardamom, in order to get food to raise their children.

¹¹ This is a direct translation of what that interviewee said about the school, it is unclear as to what he means by this.

¹² Mahout is a term for an elephant trainer or rider.

How much will they earn from each day's work collecting cardamom?

As I know from those who have gone and collected cardamom in the forest and jungle, they earn 4,000 kyat [US \$ 2.93¹³] in B--- village in a day and 5,000 kyat [US \$ 3.66] in E--- village.

Are there any other uncommon issues that the villagers encounter?

I guess there are no uncommon problems here.

How many teachers do you have in the village school?

There are five [Burma/Myanmar] government female teachers and one male teacher. Two other teachers have been hired from the [local] villages.

How much do the [two] hired teachers earn over the whole year?

We offered them 300,000 kyat [US \$219.81] [for the whole year of teaching].

Does the Burma/Myanmar government allow the school to teach Karen language?

Yes.

Is it taught within the schedule of the school timetable, or in extra time [outside of the official school time]?

It is allowed to be taught for one hour a day during school time.

Who are the teachers of Karen literacy?

They are the two teachers that were hired by the villagers.

We would like to know what you think is important for your human rights? What is the most important [part of] human rights?

The village must be peaceful; we should practice our livelihood freely without any barrier or restrictions.

What do you think the influence of the rule of law is in this area? What about justice and the court system in the local village? For example, when dealing with corruption?

I just heard that the key actors are not disciplined [do not follow the rule of law], such as in the action of land confiscation and things like that.

¹³ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 13/11/17 official market rate of 3.66 kyat to US \$1.

In the past were there human rights abuses in your area?

In the past, when clashes occurred [Tatmadaw] Battalion #39 entered the village and called the village head to gather the villagers. The military arrested the villagers and tortured [the village head] and he has had to suffer from the side effects [of the torture] up until now.

Is he still alive?

Yes, he is. He cannot see things well, and his vision is blurred as a consequence of the mistreatment [torture].

When did it happen?

It happened when I was a child, maybe in 1993 or 1994. As soon as it happened the village was displaced.

After the village was displaced, where was it resettled?

In the beginning, it was resettled to Magyi Kone. We lived there for about one to two years and then returned to our village. Not long after returning, they [Tatmadaw] came and fired at the village, and then we moved back to Magyi Kone. After staying at Magyi Kone we moved to another place, Na Ga Mauk village and we lived close to the [village] cemetery. We returned to our village after living there [Na Ga Mauk village] for ten years.

When did you return to your village [the last time]?

We came back and have lived here for ten years already, so I think we returned around 2004.¹⁴

Have you experienced war or conflict? Has there been any recent displacement?

I have not [recently] experienced displacement caused by war, but I experienced it during my childhood. And another thing that I personally faced, as village leader, was fighting at a dam site¹⁵ [in Htantabin Township]. The Burma/Myanmar government's military [Tatmadaw] investigated the case but they [Tatmadaw] didn't commit any physical abuse [against us].

How do you think we should handle the human rights abuses during the war and conflict period? For example, how should we take action against the perpetrator?

The case should be handled in compliance with law and justice. I see that if the cases are handled in a lawful manner, then we, the civilians, will have prosperity and well-being in our livelihood.

What do you think the Burma/Myanmar government should do to make young people pursue higher education?

¹⁴ The exact date is unknown.

¹⁵ The exact date and location of this incident is unknown.

In my point of view, the government should open job opportunities to young people that are relevant to their level of education, whether they have finished Standard Eight or Ten, etc. According to the current situation, only people who hold a degree or a high school certificate can have a proper livelihood. They seem unable to have a proper job without these.

Regarding security, are there any military [Tatmadaw] camps near your village?

No, there are not.

How is the security situation? What about travelling and transportation, have there been any issues or prohibitions?

Currently no.

What about in the past? Were there any restrictions on travelling?

If we look back at the previous situation, the restrictions were not only in my village but in other villages as well. We could travel only when we had our ID with us, otherwise Burma/Myanmar military soldiers or the police would not recognise us as citizens. But, the situation is not like that at the moment.

What are the biggest problems and challenges facing your community's future?

The future challenge is related to the military [Karen National Liberation Army and Tatmadaw army]. It will be best if war does not break out between our Karen army, the KNLA, and the Burma/Myanmar army again. Whenever war breaks out the victims are local villagers, who have to flee [into the jungle] and lose their way [get lost in the jungle].

What should the government [aren National Union or Burma/Myanmar] do to improve the living situation for people of your age?

The government should acknowledge, empower, and conduct workshops for them, like you [KHRG] are doing, so that they will gain more knowledge and see things clearer, and [then] I believe the situation will get much better. They can do either workshops or trainings.

Are young people interested in leadership roles?

Yes, we see that some of our young people are working with our leaders. They go wherever they are assigned. As a proverb says, "*There are more cultivated lands than there are workers*" [there are plenty of jobs and tasks to do but only a few participants]. However, they go on [participating] under any circumstances. If we look at our country's [Burma/Myanmar government] administration, [they] provide leadership to [fulfill] the basic needs in the village.

What kind of development projects would you prefer to be conducted in your village and community area?

In this area the Myanmar Council of Churches (MCC)¹⁶ came in and organised one particular group of villagers. [The group was founded] to deal with agriculture, livestock and other small livelihood [issues]. They have been working here for seven years; they are saving food back-ups for tomorrow and the year ahead. We see many benefits and advantages from their support. We, at first, did not see or know any of the organisations [like this], but they came in [to our community] later.

What about other development systems, rather than this one? For example, are there any development projects from an educational or healthcare perspective?

In my opinion, if both sides of the government, whether KNU or Burma/Myanmar government, establish this [education & healthcare programs] for us it will be beneficial.

You said MCC, what does MCC stand for?

The main organisation is called the Livelihoods and Food Security Trust Fund (LIFT). The MCC head also lives in the local area.

You said the organisation [mainly] works on agriculture and livestock?

The [project] also includes casual work and paddy cultivation. So we see that everything is good and beneficial, such as having three pools [for fishing].

Do you know who leads and monitors this?

We have one [MCC head], as I have mentioned before, who is currently working here. Or, do you mean the leader of the management or the leader only in the village?

The main organization that supports [the MCC] is LIFT. There are nine countries who are donors [of LIFT], who help the poor people in Myanmar.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

During the next five years, I see myself serving my village and villagers' livelihoods, and the Burma/Myanmar government will support me to be a village head. This is where I see [myself].

What is your biggest concern for the future?

The future is unforeseen and unpredictable, so my personal concerns might be about health.

Do you have anything to suggest to the young people in your community, in terms of development?

¹⁶ The Myanmar Council of Churches was formerly named the Burma Christian Council.

I would like to suggest to young people in my village and community to take positions [in the community] at all levels, for the purpose of future improvement.

How do you view the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement [NCA]¹⁷ that was signed between the KNU and Tatmadaw army? Have you seen any advantages?

After the NCA was signed, we saw a lot of improvements regarding livelihoods and travelling compared to the past. We do not see any arbitrary restrictions [like in the past].

What do you think of the current [National League for Democracy] government, which has responsibility for the nation?

We know that the current president [of Myanmar] is U Htin Kyaw, and State Counselor is Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the election. During the campaign, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi promised that she would help the civilians depending on their needs. However, we have not seen anything like that to date. We have not seen any [changes being] implemented to [infrastructure such as] electricity or roads. Likewise their administration doesn't seem much different to the past.

What about the KNU? What do you think about the KNU?

If we look at our people's side, the KNU, they are doing good things for our people. Our Karen people can survive through the KNU.

What year had the most human rights abuses, between 1992 and the present?

[Between] 1995 and 1996.

Have you ever heard anything about drugs in this area? For example yaba¹⁸, marijuana, etc.

¹⁷ On October 15th 2015, after a negotiation process marred with controversy over the notable non-inclusion of several ethnic armed groups and on-going conflicts in ethnic regions, 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 KNU, see "[Myanmar signs ceasefire with eight armed groups](#)," Reuters, October 15th 2015. Despite the signing of the NCA prompting a positive response from the international community, see "[Myanmar: UN chief welcomes 'milestone' signing of ceasefire agreement](#)," *UN News Centre*, October 15th 2015, KNU Chairman General Saw Mutu Say Poe's decision to sign has been met with strong opposition from other members of the Karen armed resistance and civil society groups alike, who believe the decision to be undemocratic and the NCA itself to be a superficial agreement that risks undermining a genuine peace process, see "[Without Real Political Roadmap, Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement Leads Nowhere...](#)," *Karen News*, September 1st 2015. The signing of the NCA followed the January 12th 2012 preliminary ceasefire agreement between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the preliminary ceasefire, see [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, May 2014.

¹⁸ *Yaba*, which means 'crazy medicine' in Thai, is a tablet form of methamphetamine. First developed in East Asia during the Second World War to enhance soldiers' performance, methamphetamine has become increasingly popular

I have not heard about them, nor [do we] have them in this area.

Do you want to tell us about any other information, which has been left out or missed?

I think not.

Related to the information from this interview, do you allow it to be used by KHRG?

Yes.

Further background reading on the situation in Toungoo District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- “Toungoo Interview: U A---,2017” (November 2017)
- “Toungoo Situation Update: Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi Township, November 2016 to March 2017” (November 2017)
- “Toungoo Interview: Naw Ka---, October 2016,” (June 2017)
- “Toungoo Interview: Saw A---, January 2016,” (February 2017)
- “Toungoo Interview: Naw A---, November 2015,” (February 2017)

in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Burma/Myanmar where it is typically manufactured. See, [Yaba, the 'crazy medicine' of East Asia](#), UNODC, May 2008; “[Woman raped and killed in Pa'an District, October 2012](#),” KHRG, December 2012; and Chapter IV in [Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response in Southeast Myanmar since the 2012 ceasefire](#), KHRG, June 2014.

Taw Oo (Toungoo) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)