



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

News Bulletin

October 19, 2013 / KHRG #12-108-A1-I1

Hpa-an Interview: Saw N---, June 2012

This report contains the full transcript of an interview conducted during June 2012 in T'Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. The community member interviewed Saw N---, a 60-year-old T--- villager, who described information pertaining to land confiscation and forced labour. According to information provided by Saw N---, Tatmadaw LIBs #547, #548 and #549 confiscated land from T---, M---, W---, and H--- villages. Saw N--- describes how, in the past, villagers working these farms were taxed by the Tatmadaw in order to continue farming them. Now however, they have been pressured to sign the land away completely and have needed to move to a nearby monastery. Saw N--- also describes how Battalion #548, in particular, is forcing villagers with tractors to work the land without pay. Information is also provided on past Tatmadaw abuses toward villagers having to do with killings, forced portering, and extortion. This interview and other testimony on land confiscation was originally published in the Appendix of Losing Ground: Land conflicts and collective action in eastern Myanmar.

Interview | Saw N---, (male, 60), T--- village, T'Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District (June 2012)

The following interview was conducted by a villager in Hpa-an District who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. It 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 Hpa-an District, including four other interviews, 45 photographs and five video clips.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

I want you to tell me how many acres of land were confiscated in there.

Between 1995 and 1996, the Burmese [Tatmadaw] came and built two camps in a village. [They] built three camps because the other one took some part of our land as well. They built

¹ KHRG trains villagers in eastern Burma 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, villagers 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 eastern Burma, 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. As companion to this, a redesigned website will be released in 2013. In the meantime, KHRG's most recently-published field information from Hpa-an District can be found in the report, "Hpa-an Photo Set: BGF production and sale of yaba in T'Nay Hsah and Ta Kreh townships," KHRG, July 2013.

two army camps in our village. It is [Tatmadaw Light Infantry Battalions (LIBs)] #548 and #549. The two battalions built their camps and confiscated all T--- villagers' lands. Not only T--- villagers, M---, W--- and N--- [villages] as well. They confiscated all lands in this area, including all farms. They didn't confiscate the land systematically in the past. We did farming and we could pay them a percentage. They demanded 5 or 6 baskets³ of paddy from an acre. They didn't demand the same each time. Now, in 2012, they will completely confiscate the land. They came and asked us to sign it away. We don't want to sign and we are against them now. Since then, the T--- villagers have had to move here, in the monastery. There is no place for us. They didn't demarcate land for us. They haven't given back our farms. They said it belongs to them. It belongs to the State. T--- villagers have no rights.

How many households moved to the monastery?

One group moved to T--- Monastery. Some people also went to live beside the river, M--- village, N--- and W--- villages. Some moved to the closest village, but only a few people did this. Most people moved to the monastery. There are over 30 households.

So they don't have land to work on anymore?

We have nothing. We only worked on Burmese [Tatmadaw] land but we had to give them a percentage. This year, they will completely confiscate the land and ask us to sign it away. Here you see, they type the words as if they are the land owners. They ask us to sign but we don't sign. We discussed this and we think we will never sign. Now, they pressure us and they said if we don't sign, they will report us to the police, DKBA [Democratic Karen Benevolent Army]⁴ and Peace Council⁵ who will arrest the villagers. Some of the women said if they want to arrest us, they can come and arrest us. We have nothing.

How much of the population have you counted?

Currently, there is much [population]. There are 62 [land owners] who [will] have to sign. They have to sign it now. There will be over 100 villagers whose lands were confiscated by [Battalions] #547, #548 and #549. There are 77 people whose land was confiscated that we collected in the past. Now there are 62 people who will have to sign.

How many households are [affected]?

Now, only [Battalion] #549 has started [completely] confiscating villagers' land. Not [Battalion] #548 yet. [Battalion] #547 has already started as well. The three battalions are like a "three

³ A basket is a unit of volume used to measure paddy, milled rice and seeds. One basket is equivalent to 20.9 kg. or 46.08 lb. of paddy, and 32 kg. or 70.4 lb. of milled rice. A basket is twice the volume of a big tin.

⁴ The Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA), formerly the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, was formed in December 1994 and was originally a breakaway group from the KNU/KNLA that signed a ceasefire agreement with the Burma government and directly cooperated at times with Tatmadaw forces. The formation of the DKBA was led by monk U Thuzana with the help and support of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the name of the military government in Burma at that time. For more information on the formation of the DKBA, see "Inside the DKBA," KHRG, 1996. The DKBA now refers to a splinter group from those DKBA forces reformed as Tatmadaw Border Guard Forces, also remaining independent of the KNLA. As of April 2012, the DKBA changed its name from "Buddhist" to "Benevolent" to reflect its secularity.

⁵ The KNU/KNLA Peace Council (also called the Karen Peace Council or KPC), is an armed group based in Htoh Gkaw Ko, Hpa-an District, which split from the Karen National Union (KNU) in 2007 and subsequently refused to comply with orders from the then-SPDC government to transform its forces into the Tatmadaw Border Guard; see: "KNU/KNLA Peace Council," Mizzima News, June 7th 2010 and "KPC to be outlawed if it rejects BGF," Burma News International, August 30th 2010.

stones stove.”⁶ They take for themselves all the land around the area that is close by their camps. They give us nothing. All the people, who come and live there, are guests. People never mention T--- village. People who have gone and lived there, including the village head, are not T--- villagers. They came from a low part.⁷ They came and sold T--- villagers lands. They sold the land to guests. All the people who live there are guests. None of them are original T--- villagers. T--- villagers live here in the monastery compound; only a few live outside.

So the monks let you stay here.

If the monks didn't let us stay here, there would be no place where we could go and stay. So we all come and stay here together. There is no place [no other place for us to live]. Not all are included in this list. There are many [people] still left.

Can you collect it all for me later? I want it all.

I think I can collect it all [victim names].

I will come and collect it next time when I come. Is that fine?

Yes.

So, you worked your own farm, but then you had to give it back to them [Tatmadaw]?

Yes. We had to give them [Tatmadaw]

Now, it is not the same as before. They don't do the same as before. Before, they said “*we confiscate all your land. If you want to use it, you have to pay a percentage*”. They demanded we pay them 7 baskets of paddy from every acre as a tax. Even though we had to pay 7 baskets of paddy per one acre of farm, we could do this [the villager means they could afford this demand]. They didn't say that this is their farm. They just said they confiscated the land or the land belongs to the military. Now, they will completely take it. They asked us to rent the land. This year, we don't need to pay the percentage. They asked us to sign. Next year, if they give us a chance to work on [the land], we can work, but if they don't give us chance to work on it, we cannot work on it anymore. This year, they will take all the farms so they become their farms. They now act as the land owner and we have become the people who rent the land to work on the land. We have to sign.

I will bring it [the list of victim names] back and read carefully. Now I want you to report [the information on land confiscation] with your own voice.

Yes.

Is there anything more you want to say based on this issue?

Based on this issue, T--- villagers face serious difficulties. We are currently homeless. We can do nothing. Since our grandparents time, we have supported our livelihoods by working on farms. We can't do other things. If there are no farms in this area, all of us will die. Not many people will survive. Currently, even if we don't have land, we can still do farming. We can support our livelihood. Then, some of our children go to Bangkok and they support us so we can stay alive. But now they will completely take our land. We can do nothing. We live in a monastery compound; we can do nothing. We can do nothing with our lives.

⁶ The villager is using the “*three stone stove*” metaphor to explain that the Battalion camps are set up in a triangular formation.

⁷ The “*low part*” the interviewee is referring to here are lowland areas where larger towns and cities exist.

The monks will face trouble [the monks will have no more food if the villagers who donate food for the monks cannot access their farms]. [Other villagers listening to the interview voiced this statement]

If possible, we want our [KNU] leaders to help us in the best way.

I think this is the issue that we have to consider the most.

Yes, that's right.

I will try my best as much as I can.

Thank you very much for coming and meeting us. We have no one to reply to. We have to be afraid of everything. In the past, if you go and complain to them [Tatmadaw Battalions 547, 548, and 549], they arrested us and put people in the stocks and threatened us. They *ma der* [ill-treated] people. Before they [Tatmadaw Battalions 547, 548, and 549] built their camp [Tatmadaw soldiers had to stay around the village and as a result] many lives disappeared [villagers were killed]. People who witnessed didn't dare to say anything. If you said something, they used their power and no one dared to complain to them. We saw many things in the past. Many lives disappeared before the army camps were set up. They shot [villagers] and they said it is *nga bway* [Tatmadaw blamed the shootings on KNLA soldiers]. So no one dares to do anything. When you reported things to them, they didn't agree.

Did they shoot at you?

Yes, many people died when they built their camps, and it was war time. They came and arrested people to force them to porter. If you ran, they shot you. When villagers die, they said it was the enemy [KNLA]. You couldn't say anything. We just had to suffer.

What did they tell you, related to signing the paper?

They will completely take our farms and we will become like people who rent and work on their land. To let their leader know, they asked us to sign. They are like the land owners and we have to sign as though we are renting the land. They will take our farms, so they will not be our farms any more. It becomes their farm. We have to sign.

I came and took a photo yesterday. I saw villagers ploughing farms for them. What is that?

That is [Battalion] #548. We always have to do this. It was worse in the past. It's calmer now, but only this year. In the previous years, we have had no time to rest. We had to go and do it for them every day. They gathered villagers, and every village had to do *loh ah pay*.⁸ For this year, we don't have to do [anything] with human strength. Only people who have machines [tractors] have to go every day, but not as many people have to go as in the previous years.

I heard people said that they spread paddy seeds and then they gather villagers' cows and let the cows eat the paddy, and then they fine villagers. Is that right?

⁸ Loh ah pay is a Burmese term now commonly used in reference to forced labour, although traditionally referring to voluntary service for temples or the local community, not military or state projects.

They did it in the past and it still happens now. If they don't like their paddy; they let villagers buffaloes eat the paddy and they fine the buffaloes' owner 60,000 kyat (US \$68.80)⁹ to 70,000 kyat (US \$80.27). There are many such cases like this. Villagers always have to pay. They catch villagers' cows and they tie them up. Then they fine 5,000 kyat (US \$5.73) to 6,000 kyat (US \$6.88) or 10,000 kyat (US \$11.46). Now they said if we don't sign, we can't go and do our farming. They said they will take even the paddy that is already planted.

The one that you already planted?

Yes. It is the one that villagers planted beside the river. It is the area where they asked villagers to sign over. They said we can't do our farming if we don't go and sign. They asked us to sign. If we sign, we lose everything. We don't sign. We try our best. We report it to [inaudible] group and we think the information will go further. We went and took a photo one day.

If they help us, we are very grateful. Now you come to us and we are happy.

We are happy. We wanted to meet you a long time ago.

If we have a friend like you, we will have a chance to stay as we have stayed as in the past. If no one helps us, we can't stay as we live in the past.

The difficulty reaches to T--- villagers now. They can do nothing. They can't go forward and backward [move freely] we are happy and delighted when we meet with our leaders like you. There is no one we can rely on. We try.

Further background on the current situation in Hpa-an District can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- "Hpa-an Situation Update: T'Nay Hsah Township, March to May 2013," (August 2013)
- "Hpa-an Photo Set: BGF production and sale of yaba in T'Nay Hsah and Ta Kreh townships," (July 2013)
- "Hpa-an Situation Update: T'Nay Hsah Township, June 2012 to February 2013," (June 2013)
- "Hpa-an Situation Update: Ta Kreh and T'Nay Hsah Townships, December 2012," (April 2013)
- "Hpa-an Situation Update: T'Nay Hsah Township, November to December 2012," (March 2013)

⁹ As of August 16th 2012, all conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report are based on the official market rate of 872 kyat to the US \$1. This reflects new measures taken by Burma's central bank on April 2nd 2012 to initiate a managed float of the Kyat, thus replacing the previous fixed rate of 6.5 kyat to US \$1.

