



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

February 23, 2015 / KHRG #13-38-A2-I1

Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, January 2013

This Interview with Saw A--- describes events occurring in Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District, in January 2013, including arbitrary taxation, education, healthcare, villagers livelihoods, gold mining and villagers asked to join the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO).

- *The Tatmadaw arbitrarily taxed local villagers in Dwe Lo Township, as well as demanded thatches.*
 - *Wealthy individuals from China and Rakhine State have conducted gold mining activities in Dwe Lo Township, restricting access to areas and rivers for local villagers, which have affected livelihoods.*
 - *The Karen National Union (KNU) requested that two villagers over the age of 18 from each village in the area volunteer for service with the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO).*
-

Interview | Saw A---, (male, 36), B--- village (also known as C--- village), Dwe Lo Township, Hpapun District (January 2013)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Hpapun District in January 2013 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 Hpapun District, including three other interviews.

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Farming a hill field and panning for gold

Position: School committee member

What is your name?

Saw A---.

Do you have any other names?

No, I do not. I have only this name.

¹ KHRG trains community members in eastern 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

How old are you?

I am 36 years old.

In which village do you live?

I live in B--- village, also called C--- village.

It is in Meh Choh village tract?

Yes.

What about township?

It is in Dwe Lo Township.

What about district?

It is in Mu Traw [Hpapun] District.

What is your ethnicity?

I am S'gaw Karen.

What is your religion?

I am a Buddhist.

What is your occupation?

I am working on a hill field [farming] and panning for gold.

Do you have any responsibility in the village?

No, I do not, but I work for the school and look after the school. It is like a school committee.

Why do people call the name of the village B--- as C---?

People just turned the name of the village from B--- into C--- but it is B--- area [village].

Have the Tatmadaw ever come into your village, beginning in 2012 to 2013?

They have not come into the village for three years.

Are there any Tatmadaw army camps near your village?

It [a Tatmadaw camp] is in D--- village.

How long does it take [to get to D--- village]?

It takes two hours [on foot].

When they [Tatmadaw] live in D--- village, do they sometimes demand portering, forced labour, messengers, or arbitrarily arrest the people?

[No, they do not, but] when they collect taxes it also includes us.

Do you have to go [for forced labour]?

No, we do not have to go. They only collect money [from us]. And if they demand thatches, we have to give them.

Have you ever paid them money that they demanded in the years 2012 and 2013?

Yes, I had to pay. I just had to pay once only.

When did you pay them?

It was three years ago.

So, you did not have to pay them recently?

No.

So there is no forced labour demands by the Tatmadaw in your village during these three years?

Yes, there is nothing [no demands].

Is there a school in the village?

Yes.

How many standards are there in the school?

There are four standards.

How many students are there at the school?

There are about 20 students in the school.

How many kinds of languages [subjects] do the students learn in the school?

They have to learn Geography, Science, Karen and English.

Where do the students get the books from?

They have to buy the books by themselves.

Where do you get the teachers from?

We get the teachers from Muh Cha Ra [village].

Do you have to hire them or do they come to work as volunteers?

We have to hire them.

Regarding the school, did the villagers themselves build it, did the KNU [Karen National Union] leaders build it or did the government leaders build it?

The KNU leaders encouraged us with words [to build the school] and we, the villagers, built the school together.

Where do they get the books from?

We have to buy the books.

Can the students study in the school peacefully? Is there anyone who comes and disturbs them and scolds them?

No, there is no one [who comes and disturbs them and scolds them].

So they can study peacefully. Is there any clinic in the village?

No, there is not.

So if the villagers are ill, where do they go to get the medicine or to treat themselves?

We go to Buh Law Kloh Toh [village].

Do you go to buy the medicine?

We go to buy the medicines and if we are seriously ill, we go there to call the health worker.

Do you have to pay the cost of the medicine when the health worker comes to treat the patients?

Yes, we have to pay the cost of the medicine.

So, if you have a serious disease, where do you go [to get treatment]?

We go to Buh Law Kloh Toh [village].

What are the villagers' occupations?

Mostly, the villagers' occupations are [panning for] gold.

Does [panning] for gold provide enough [money] for all of the villagers?

It covers the cost of fish paste and salt for us. Regarding the rice, we are working on the hill field [and we get the rice from there].

Does it cover enough [for your food]?

If we do not get enough rice [from our hill field], we are working on [panning for] gold.

As you are on the school committee, what are your responsibilities?

I have to take care of the school, help the villagers building the school and work together with the villagers.

How long have you worked [as a school committee member]?

I have worked for three years.

Are there any wealthy people who come to mine gold?

Yes, there are.

Is the area very large where they mine gold?

Yes, it is.

Since they came to mine gold, did they destroy any of the villagers' land?

When the DKBA [Democratic Karen Benevolent Army]² mined gold in the past, it destroyed the villagers' land. However, the gold mining which people are doing currently does not destroy any of the villagers' land.

Why does it not destroy the villagers' land?

It is because they [the miners] pay the cost of the land [that they destroyed].

So, for example, the villagers ask them to pay the cost of the land that they have destroyed and they have to pay the cost to the villagers?

² 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/Myanmar 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/Myanmar 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.

Yes.

They have to pay the full amount of the cost?

Yes.

How long have they mined for gold here?

It has been for two years.

Does the gold mining benefit the villagers a lot or a little?

No, it does not benefit the villagers much.

What kind of benefit do the villagers receive?

There is a benefit [for the villagers] like when we ask them to help us [purchase] one or two bags of cement, they help us.

Since they [wealthy people] come and mine gold, are there any difficulties for the villagers to pan for gold? Like they do not allow the villagers to pan for gold together with them or they do not give the villagers permission to pan for gold?

When we talk to them [about panning for gold together with them], they said to us that they have already bought the land. When some of the villagers go to pan for gold, they told them [villagers] that they have already bought the land. Therefore, the villagers cannot pan for gold.

What do the villagers do when they cannot pan for gold?

They then have to come back [to their homes].

The villagers do not complain about anything?

No, they do not.

So, where do you pan for gold to cover the cost of fish paste and salt?

We cannot pan for gold as they do not allow us to pan for gold.

Which river is that?

It is in Meh Kleh River.

When the villagers go to pan for gold, do they have to have a recommendation letter?

No, they have never done that yet.

There is only one problem, [and that is] that the villagers are not allowed to pan for gold together with them?

Yes.

How do you feel about gold mining? Do you feel worried or happy?

I have worries about whether or not we will have a chance to pan for gold in the future, and whether or not we can work for our livelihoods. We [I] have to think about these [our livelihoods]. However, we cannot do anything. People come to work in our village, but some of the villagers get [compensated for] the cost for their lands; so we feel happy for our friends.

If you grow the plants on the ground where they have mined the gold, will the plants grow well?

I do not think the plants will grow well.

Were there any of the [other people's] dog fruit plantations, palm plantations, and paddy fields included [destroyed] when they mined the gold?

It included some of them.

Where [who] do they ask permission from when they come to mine the gold?

I do not know where they ask permission from. When I saw them, they had already arrived and brought their materials to mine for gold.

Where are they mostly from? Are they from the city or from the mountain?

Mostly, they are from the city.

How many ethnicities came to mine for gold?

I do not know. It might include all of the ethnicities.

Are there any foreigners, like Chinese?

It includes many Chinese and Arakanese.

Do they behave towards you with good manners?

We do not try to make friends with them and they also do not make friends with us. Since they are rich, we do not dare to make friends with them.

When they come and mine for gold, does it benefit the villagers or does it just benefit themselves?

It does not benefit the villagers.

So it only benefits themselves?

Yes.

Are there any landmines planted by the Tatmadaw or KNU near your village or near the road?

No, there are not [any] presently.

Are there any villagers who are forced to be soldiers by the Tatmadaw, like to be police or to be BGF [Border Guard Force]³ soldiers?

No, there are not. The villagers are only asked to be local soldiers [for the KNU].

How do they request that?

They [the KNU] ask for one or two villagers per village.

Do they forcibly ask or arrest the villagers?

They do not forcibly ask the villagers, they just ask the villagers [to join the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO)].⁴

Are the villagers aged above 18 or under 18?

They are above 18 years old.

What do they have to do as KNDO soldiers for the village tract?

They have to follow the leader of KNDO.

Can you tell me the location of C--- village?

There is E--- [village] and La Kyoh Mountain in the East, past the village.

Is it very far [from here]? How long does it take?

It takes one hour [to get there from here].

³ 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 Burmese government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw. BGF battalions are assigned four digit battalion numbers, whereas regular Tatmadaw infantry battalions are assigned two digit battalion numbers and light infantry battalions are identified by two or three-digit battalion numbers. For more information, see “[DKBA officially becomes Border Guard Force](#)” *Democratic Voice of Burma*, August 2010, and, “[Exploitation and recruitment under the DKBA in Pa'an District](#),” KHRG, June 2009.

⁴ 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.

What about in the west part of the village?

There is F--- [village] and Meh Kleh River.

Is it far from here?

No, it is not. You can see it from here.

What about at the source of the river?

It is very far from here.

What about at the mouth of the river?

It is also very far from here.

Which village is it [the mouth of the river] close to?

It is close to D--- village.

How long has this village been located here?

It has been located here since I was young.

How many households are there in the village?

There are *[censored for security]* in the village.

Does the gold mining happen only in your area in Meh Kleh River? What about the other rivers in other areas?

It also happens in Baw Paw Law River, Meh Toh Law River, and Meh Kleh Law River.

Are there any villages near these rivers?

There is Hpway Pwah village near Meh Kleh Law River; there is also Thay Kyoh [village], Ta Hkaw Hta village and Paw Peh Hta village near Baw Paw Law River.

Do the villagers who live near these rivers have the same feeling as you have?

They have the same feeling as me.

So the villagers do not have much [no] benefit from mining gold?

Yes.

Is there anything that I have not asked you about? Do you want to mention anything else? If so, you can talk about it now.

I want to mention one thing: that I and the leaders [village heads] will arrange the best for us [villagers].

What will the leaders arrange that will be the best for us? Can you tell me about this?

The situation of the villagers will be good in the future and it will be easier for the villagers to work for their livelihoods.

What kind of thing needs to be done?

So that there will be no difficulty for the villagers to work for their livelihoods.

What problem do the villagers have now?

They have the problem that they are not allowed to go and pan for gold.

What is your opinion on the gold mining? Do you want people continue mining the gold or do you want people to stop?

As for me, I do not want the people to come and mine gold. However, although we said that we do not want it, people come to pan for gold [by themselves] and we cannot do anything. They also do not pan for gold on our land. It is not just my river and it belongs to everyone. Therefore, I cannot do anything. If people come to mine gold, we just have to look at them. However, it is good, if they allow us [the local villagers] to pan for gold.

What about now?

Now, if we go to pan for gold, they tell us that they have already bought the land. So, we think that they will not allow us to pan for gold.

Is there anything else?

No, there is nothing else.

Thank you so much.

Thank you.

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

- “Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, October 2014,” (February 2015)
- “News Bulletin: Border Guard Force (BGF) Battalion #1013 Sergeant Saw Hpah Ghaw steals villagers’ livestock,” (January 2015)
- “Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, February to June 2014,” (December 2014)
- “Hpapun Interview: Naw A---, January 2013,” (December 2014)
- “Hpapun Situation Update: Bu Tho Township, January to June 2014,” (December 2014)

Mu Traw (Hpapun) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)