



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

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Hpapun Interview: Saw A---, November 2012

This Interview with Saw A--- describes events occurring in Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District, during November 2012. It includes information regarding death threats made against a village head, demands for arbitrary taxation and the assault of a cattle trader by Tatmadaw-Border Guard Force (BGF) forces, as well as contamination by landmines planted by both the Karen National Union (KNU) and BGF forces.

Interview | Saw A---, (male, 48), N--- village, Bu Tho Township, Hpapun District (November 2012)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions. It was conducted in Hpapun District in November 2012 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 ten other interviews, five incident reports, one situation update and 39 photographs.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Buddhist

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Farmer

Position: Village head

What do people call you?

Saw A---

Do you have any other name?

Saw K---

¹ KHRG trains community members 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, 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 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. For additional reports categorised by Type, Issue, Location and Year, please see the Related Readings component following each report on KHRG's Website.

How old are you?

I think 48 years old.

Where do you live and what is the name of the village that you are living in?

People call it N---

So you live in this village right? Have you lived in any other village before?

No. I have just lived in this village since I was born.

Do you have family?

Yes I do.

How many children do you have?

I have five children.

How old is the eldest?

23.

How old is the youngest?

The youngest is three years old.

What is your religion?

Buddhist.

What is your occupation?

Flat field farming, hill field farming and cultivation.

Have you ever seen any conflict like people fighting or arguing?

We do not have that in our village. Sometimes we argue, but we finish it peacefully.

What about over the last month? Have you seen any conflict caused by the KNU [Karen National Union] or the BGF [Border Guard Force]?³

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 or 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.

There haven't been cases regarding [the KNU] but there have been regarding the BGF. The BGF wanted to cut my throat many times in the past three or four months.

Why did they want to cut your throat?

They said that I am not a good village head because people [the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)] shoot them very often. [They said] "*We will cut your throat if you are not doing your job very well*".

Did they do it?

No. They did not. They just threatened people.

What about other cases? For example, they did not hurt you but did they hurt other people?

They did not hurt anyone; they just threatened people.

Where will we reach if we go east from this village?

This road goes to Meh Say and then to Meh Tha Waw.

Where will we reach if we follow the Bweh Lo River?

We will reach Hpa-an [town].

Can you travel to Baw Tho Hta, Ka Taing Tee and Baw Kyuh Ler by this way?⁴

We can go to Baw Tho Hta, Ka Taing Tee and Baw Kyuh Ler after Hpa-an.

Can we travel by car using this road?

You mean to Meh Say?

Yes.

Yes, we can travel by car in the summer time.

Have you seen cars using the road?

No. Cars do not come any more. They came last year.

What [kind of traffic] is traveling [on the road] now?

[Ox] carts and motorbikes are using [the road] for traveling now. Cars do not come any more.

Do people use this road for trading buffalos and cattle?

Yes. This road was the main road in the past. People do not do it now because [BGF] Commander Paa Nwee has banned it [the herding of cattle on the road for the purpose of taking them to Thailand for trade].

⁴ It is not entirely clear if the interviewer is referring to a road or the Bweh Lo River.

When did he ban it?

Not very long ago.

What about before commander Paa Nwee banned the [herding of cattle on the] road?

Many people traded.

How many cattle did one person trade?

Sometimes they had 100 and sometimes 60 or 70.

How many armed group's [checkpoints] did they have to pass?

They had to pass BGF checkpoints.

What is the bosses' [traders'] opinion of the BGF?

They had to pay 20,000 kyat (US \$20.51)⁵ for each pair of cattle. They had to pay it otherwise they were not allowed to go [pass the checkpoint].

Do they [the BGF] give trouble [to the traders] after they have paid them?

No.

Have you seen any problems between the BGF and traders?

They [BGF] do not give them trouble if they pay the tax, they just let them go.

I want to know, for example, does the BGF ask the traders who have already paid tax to pay more than they are required to pay?

No they do not ask.

For example, the superior has already asked for the tax payment but his subordinate asks for it again. Have you seen it before?

We do not have it anymore in the BGF era. We had it when they were DKBA [Democratic Karen Buddhist Army].⁶ When they were DKBA, they asked for tax here and then traders had to pay it again when they reached another place.

⁵ All conversion estimates for the Kyat in this report are based on the June 18th 2014 official market rate of 975 kyat to the US \$1.

⁶ 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. While Tatmadaw and DKBA units had operated together for years, this operational hierarchy became formalised with the DKBA's transformation into a 'Border Guard Force' under control of the Tatmadaw and containing a fixed number quota of Tatmadaw officers. This transformation dates to at least May 2009, when commanding officers stated in high-level meeting of

Have you seen the BGF torture traders?

No. I have not seen it. I never heard about it.

What about in other villages like Meh Pree?

I do not know because we do not live there and it is not our village.

Have the KNU and BGF encountered each other in your village?

Yes.

When?

The 5th of this month [in the Burmese calendar].

So, on November 18th [in the Gregorian calendar]?

I do not know the English month. I just know the Burmese month. It is the 2nd day in the English month.

Of this month?

Yes.

So it means November 2nd 2012?

Yes.

Why did they [the BGF] come?

They [the BGF] did not inform the village leaders that they would come. So the KNU went down and surrounded him [a BGF officer who came to the village] when they saw him. No, not surrounded him, just went down and visited him. And after the KNU went back, he [the BGF officer] came and told me that the KNU had surrounded him.

Did fighting happen?

No.

How many people did the BGF come with?

Only one.

What about the KNU?

Seven people.

DKBA officers that the DKBA would transform itself into a 'Border Guard Force;' unpublished leaked minutes from the May 2009 meeting are on file with KHRG. Ceremonies attended by Tatmadaw commanders officially announced the transformation of large portions of the DKBA into Border Guard Forces in September 2010; see, for example: "[Border Guard Forces of South-East Command formed in Paingkyon of Kayin State](#)," *New Light of Myanmar*, August 22nd 2010; and "[Border Guard Force formed at Winkwinkalay Region, Myawaddy Township, Kayin State](#)," *New Light of Myanmar*, August 25th 2010.

Do you know the name of the BGF [soldier who came to the village]?

Yes I know. His name is Maung Ni.

What is his position?

He is an officer in the BGF and a corporal in the Tatmadaw.

So the Tatmadaw recognise him as a corporal?

Yes, the Tatmadaw recognise him as a corporal and the BGF recognise him as a 2nd Lieutenant. One star.

So he met with the KNU and went back. The KNU did not arrest him?

Yes, he went back. The KNU did not arrest him.

Did he take any people with him?

Yes, he called me to go back with him to Meh Pree.

Did you see anything strange when you went with him?

Nothing strange. He just asked me to eat rice when we arrived at the BGF camp.

Did something happen on the day when you went back [to the BGF camp] with him?

Yes.

What happened?

He punched a *Kaw La* [Muslim].⁷

Why did he punch the *Kaw La*?

I do not know. The *Kaw La* had already given tax to Nyaunt Thein [a BGF commander].

Please wait. What is the name of the *Kaw La*?

H---.

How old is he?

I do not know. He is younger than me. He is about 45.

Where does he live?

P--- [village].

What is his occupation?

⁷ *Kaw La Thu*, “thu” meaning black, is a term used to refer to Muslim people by Karen people in Burma. Muslim people do not typically self-identify with this term.

I do not know because I do not live there, but I have seen that he is working as a cattle trader. He is a boss.

Could you please tell me as much as you know about the case?

I know all about it. Maung Ni slapped the face of the *Kaw La* when he saw him. I told him not to do this. The *Kaw La* had already given 200,000 [kyat] (US \$205.10) to Nyaunt Thein.

Burmese currency or Thai currency?

Burmese currency. Maung Ni asked him for 100,000 kyat (US \$102.55) and he gave it. So in total he paid 300,000 kyat (US \$307.65). He [Maung Ni] told Nyaunt Thein not to say anything because it did not concern him. Nyaunt Thein did not say anything.

So the one who punched [H---] was Maung Ni?

Yes.

He punched H--- because he did not give him money?

H--- gave him money but he hit him [anyway].

How many times did he punch him?

I did not count how many times. He punched him and slapped his face and asked if anyone dared to vouch for him, and H---'s friends said they could vouch for him because he had not done anything wrong.

So he took the 300,000 kyat?

Yes. He took it.

So he released the *Kaw La* after his friends vouched for him?

Yes. Then he continued his trip. He had to go another way because [BGF Commander] Paa Nwee did not allow them [to pass].

What do you think about the *Kaw La*? Did he do anything wrong?

No. He did not do anything wrong.

So the BGF assaulted him without any reason?

Yes.

The one who assaulted the *Kaw La* is a [Tatmadaw] corporal?

Yes. Corporal Maung Ni.

Where did he assault him?

Beside Commander Nyaunt Thein's house.

Where is Commander Nyaunt Thein's house located?

Meh Pre Paa Doh [village].

Have you seen it with your own eyes?

Yes, I saw it because I was beside them.

Did he punch you?

He did not punch me.

So, we have got the specific information. Do you want to say anything?

I do know what to say. We just want them [the government and armed groups] to allow our civilians to work freely without hindrance because we are working for our livelihoods. Even if they disturb us [prevent local villagers from travelling freely] is no problem, but they even assaulted people and we were very disappointed when we saw it. We are human beings and *Kaw La* are also human beings. We have to love each other.

I want to ask you more questions. Are there any landmines [in this area which were] planted by the KNU, BGF or Tatmadaw?

Yes we have them. We have many landmines [which were] planted by the KNU. There are 17 landmines [which were] planted by the BGF.

Are you sure?

Yes, I am sure.

Have they not removed them?

No, they have not. The KNU have more than 17 and I have seen more than seven landmines with my own eyes when I travelled with them.

Did the KNU inform the villagers of the places where the landmines are planted after they planted them?

Yes.

What about the BGF?

No, they did not inform the villagers.

So, you still have landmines?

Yes, there are landmines surrounding us in this area.

Have you heard of refugees? For example like [those in] Mae La Oo or Mae La [refugee camps in Thailand]. For example, will you allow them to live with you in your village or your village area?

Yes, we will accept it if they are Karen. We would be happy if they live with us and we will have more friends.

Will you allow us to submit this interview to some [other] organisations, for example the UN [United Nations] or the ILO [International Labour Organisation]?

Yes.

Thank you.

Thank you.

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

- “Hpapun Incident Report: Restriction of movement in Dwe Lo Township, December 2013,” (June 2014)
- “Hpapun Photo Set: BGF Battalion #1013 land confiscation for army base in Dwe Lo Township, June 2012 to November 2013,” (June 2014)
- “Hpapun Incident Report: Home guard killed by Tatmadaw landmine in Lu Thaw Township, January 2014,” (June 2014)
- *Chapter: Drug production, use and the social impacts in Southeast Myanmar since the January 2012 ceasefire*, (June 2014)
- “Hpapun Incident Report: Attack on villager in Bu Tho Township, January 2013,” (June 2014)

