



Interviews

July 7th 2020 / KHRG # 19-39-A1-I1

Kler Lwee Htoo District Interviews: Tatmadaw bridge construction activities result in displacement and indiscriminate firing at a villager, May 2019

These three interviews from May 2019 describe events that occurred in Kheh Der village tract, Kyaukkyi Township, Kler Lwee Htoo [Nyaunglebin] District. Tatmadaw soldiers ensuring the security of military bridge construction activities trespassed into areas controlled by the Karen National Union [KNU]¹ and fired indiscriminately at a villager and livestock. As a result, the local population is now afraid to travel and some villagers have displaced to nearby forest areas, where they face difficulties accessing food and water.²

Saw³ B---, H--- village, Kheh Der village tract, Kyaukkyi Township, Kler Lwee Htoo District

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: H--- village administrator

First interview, May 4th 2019

The [Facebook page] ‘Karen History’ posted news about a villager from your village who was shot at. Is that true?

Yes, the Tatmadaw⁴ soldiers [who were on guard duty] shot at him but the bullet did not hit him.

What is the number of the Light Infantry Battalion [involved]?

He was looking for his buffaloes. He was shot at by Tatmadaw soldiers while he was resting in his hut. When he turned to look toward [the direction from which] the sound of the gun [came from], it [the firearm] was pointing at him. Fortunately, the first shot missed him. Then, the villager jumped down from his hut and ran directly back to his village.

¹ 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 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.

² The present document is based on information received in May 2019. It was provided by a community member in Kler Lwee Htoo District 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.

³ Saw is a S’gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person’s name.

⁴ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

Where was he shot at?

He was shot at in P--- [area].

Is Thay Boh Plaw close to T’Kaw Der village?

It’s very close to H---.

What is the name of the villager [who was shot at]?

The villager’s name is W--- but he is also known as A---.

Where are the Tatmadaw soldiers constructing the road?⁵

They are constructing a bridge [near] the H--- shop [a small grocery store]. I do not dare to go there because they shot [their firearms] once in the morning and once in the evening [on the day the villager was shot at]. That is why I do not know whether they are constructing one or two bridges.

Did you have to close the [village tract] office?

Yes, nobody dares to go there.

So, did you have to remove your stuff from there?

We already removed our stuff.

What about the local force [Karen National Defence Organisation]?⁶

They are monitoring [the situation] and getting ready to fight if the Tatmadaw soldiers go beyond 50 yards [45.72 metres] [According to KNU policy, Tatmadaw soldiers must remain within 50 yards of the road in this area]. Yesterday, when we heard the gunfire, no one dared to travel. Some of the H--- villagers might go to get rice as they are facing difficulty to access foods. They have to go and get rice from Ler Doh [Kyaukkyi Township]. Villagers in my village are afraid to travel now [because Tatmadaw soldiers are operating between the village and Ler Doh Township].

What do villagers from D--- village and [other] villages in the K--- village tract worry about now?

They brought their stuff [belongings] to the forest [they made preparations to relocate]. Later, they brought back some of their stuff [to the village] because of the rain.

Did the shooting [at the villager] occur because Tatmadaw soldiers trespassed 50 yards into a KNU-controlled area [went beyond 50 yards from the road]?

I think so. The Tatmadaw soldiers were patrolling 50 yards [beyond the road, and thus entered] inside the restricted area. Villagers saw that they were patrolling, so they were afraid to go out to look for their buffaloes.

Do you know when the shooting occurred? When was W--- shot at?

It might have been on May 1st 2019. It was on April 30th 2019. [...] I forgot to note the date of the incident.

Did this happen on a Sunday?

I think W--- was shot at on May 1st 2019. He was shot at in the morning.

⁵ KHRG (April 2019), “[Nyaunglebin District: Tatmadaw road construction activities lead to confrontations with the KNLA, displacement and property damage in Kyaukkyi Township](#)”.

⁶ 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.

Did it happen on a Sunday?

No, people had just invited [villagers] for a prayer so they were getting ready to go to church. When they heard the sound [of gunfire], they dared not go anymore and returned. The shooting happened twice on that day. It happened once in the morning and once in the evening. [...]

So this happened on the 29th, which was a Monday?

If I am not wrong, it might have been on the 30th [Tuesday] April or May 1st 2019.

Villagers have now packed and are ready to flee. What about their livelihood problems?

The villagers face [challenges] getting food. They are afraid they can no longer live in their houses. They depend on their good fortune as [getting more] food becomes [increasingly] important for them. They have to go and get food to be able to eat.

Did KNU leaders [give suggestions or find ways to solve] this matter?

If I have time, I will go and meet with them. In my perspective, if the organisation [KNU] [can operate in this kind of situation], the civilians can also live [with it].

Did they call you?

No, I want to go and see them myself. I think villagers can survive for another one or two months [with the food they have].

What is your perspective regarding this situation?

In my perspective, they [the Tatmadaw] should follow what is in the NCA [Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement]. If they don't, it will be really hard to trust [them]. We cannot believe that they are trying to achieve peace given the way they are acting now.

How many people in total are there in the village tract?

There are 1087 people.

Do you have more to say about this?

To my knowledge, a lot of countries know about the signing of the NCA in Myanmar. [The [Tatmadaw] promised to protect civilians [according to] the NCA code of conduct. They are not trustworthy because they do not put the interests of the civilians first. That's becoming a fear for all civilians.

Is there anything you would like to add?

In the past, villagers became displaced persons. Now, the villagers have started to rebuild their livelihoods, so I would like the government to strengthen the way the NCA is [implemented] to be able to achieve genuine peace. [...] Looking at the situation after the NCA, there are many actions that show that the Tatmadaw cannot be trusted.

Yesterday [May 3rd 2020] at 7 pm, the Tatmadaw fired four or five times at Muh Theh village, [near the] Thay Nweh Loh Kloh [river], in the K'Baw Soe area, so the villagers were afraid to go work on their farms. We were afraid to go back to H--- village [some people left the village and relocated to a nearby forest area because of the presence of Tatmadaw soldiers]. Now, it is the beginning of the rainy season, which is the best time for the villagers to work on their farms. Villagers are now facing difficulties as they are afraid to look for their buffaloes. Some buffaloes died by stepping on landmines. Currently, the Tatmadaw is firing shots two or three times per night. They even shot at buffaloes.

Are they now constructing bridges on [the] Pa Kaw Loh Kloh and Theh Loh Kloh [rivers]?

No one dares to go to [the] Theh Loh Kloh [river]. The Tatmadaw soldiers also go to the village tract office.

Are they going beyond 50 yards [of the road]?

They are going beyond 50 yards, and up to 1,000 yards [914.4 metres]. They went to Thay Nweh Hkee, Pa Kaw Hta (Hkee) and Wah Doh Hkee villages. A place like Khaw Khaw Nyoh Lu is more than 1,000 yards inside the restricted area. They also settled on the other side of Aee Tha Plaw, 400 or 500 yards [365.76 or 457.2 metres] inside the restricted area.

Do you know how many battalions are securing [the construction sites]?

There are three or four Tatmadaw battalions, [including] Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) #57 and LIB #48.

What about the battalions in Muh Theh village?

It is LIB #124. There is a battalion commander. LIB #57 and LIB #48 were also staying there.

Did they [Tatmadaw] inform the KNU liaison office and the KNLA [Karen National Liberation Army]⁷ soldiers about their patrols?

I do not know about this.

Second interview, May 13rd 2019

What is the current situation?

They [the Tatmadaw] are proceeding with the bridge construction. The guards are not retreating and still stand guarding there.

Were there any physical abuses committed?

No. Nevertheless, LIB #124's commander came to H-- village in the morning at 9:33 am [KHRG was not able to determine the exact date].

What did he do there?

He did not do anything. He came and monitored the place with his two soldiers and they brought along guns. He did tell the villagers to go and eat with him as he had chicken curry. He did not say anything else.

Are villagers [still] living there?

Yes.

What problems are the H--- villagers facing in the relocation area?

[...] We have problems accessing water as the river is far away. We also have problems washing our clothes and taking a bath because we do not have water containers.

Are you having problems accessing water to cook, wash and bathe?

To cook, it is okay but we have difficulties [finding water to] wash and bathe. We only have enough water to drink.

What are the other problems the villagers are facing?

The villagers do not have enough rice.

What is the situation in terms of travelling?

Villagers now travel in fear as Tatmadaw soldiers are deployed around the area.

Are they still constructing the bridges?

Yes, they are.

⁷ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

Is there anything else you would like to say?

If I have anything to say, I will contact you. We have not held a meeting with the villagers yet. After we hold a meeting with the villagers, I will contact you again.

Third interview, May 21st 2019

[...] I saw that ‘Karen History’ posted online that D--- villagers were fleeing to the forest. Is that true?

Tatmadaw soldiers arrived at our F--- village [the relocation site where some of the H--- villagers live] at 6:40 am with their guns [KHRG was not able to determine the exact date].

Did they come with guns?

Yes.

Did the villagers flee in the afternoon?

Yes. They [Tatmadaw] did not come into the village [F---]. They were patrolling around the village.

Have they [Tatmadaw] gone back now?

They went back to stay along the H--- motorway.

Are they now staying in H--- village?

Yes, they are now staying there.

Are the villagers who live in the new village [relocation site] afraid of anything?

They are really afraid and a lot of people are panicking and shaking [in fear].

Did people flee to the forest?

Even villagers from K--- village fled.

Do you know which battalion was [deployed in the area]?

Light Infantry Division #57.

What problems are the villagers currently facing?

The villagers are afraid of living in the village. In addition, they are afraid to go out and find food. They are also getting ready to flee [further away].



These two photos were taken on April 2nd 2019. They show villagers from H--- village clearing a new place to live in a nearby forest. [Photos: KHRG]

Further background reading on human rights abuses committed by the Tatmadaw in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Mu Traw District Interview: Shelling by the Tatmadaw resulting in temporary displacement in Lu Thaw Township, January to April 2020”](#), (June 2020)
- [“Mu Traw District: Tatmadaw soldiers killed a Karen community leader and a KNU forest ranger in March 2020”](#), (April 2020)
- [“Mu Traw District Incident Report: Physical violence against a villager by Tatmadaw soldiers in Dwe Lo Township, January 2020”](#), (March 2020)

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.

Kler Lwee Htoo (Nyaunglebin) District

