



Incident Report

November 26th 2020 / KHRG # 20-130-11

Hpa-an District Incident Report: *Witchcraft-related killing in T’Nay Hsah Township, July 2020*

This Incident Report describes what appears to be a witchcraft-related killing case that happened in N--- village, Htoh Kaw Koh village tract,¹ T’Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District – a mixed-control area mainly managed by the KNU/KNLA-Peace Council (KNU/KNLA-PC).² Saw M---, a local villager, was killed by an unknown gunman on July 10th 2020. Saw M--- and his wife had been facing witchcraft allegations since around 2017 as a result of gossip within the local community. His widow and one of his children are now staying in a Karen Women’s Organisation (KWO) safe house in Hpa-an District out of fear for their security. No local authorities have taken action to investigate the murder, thus no perpetrator has been officially identified.³

Part 1 – Incident Details

Type of Incident	Witchcraft-related killing
Date of Incident(s)	July 10 th 2020
Incident Location (Village, Township and District)	N--- village, Htoh Kaw Koh village tract, T’Nay Hsah Township

Victim Information	
Name	Saw ⁴ M---
Age	49
Sex	Male
Ethnicity	Karen
Family	Married
Position	Villager

¹ A village tract is an administrative unit of between five and 20 villages in a local area, often centred on a large village.

² The KNU/KNLA-Peace Council is an armed group based in the Htoh Kaw Koh village tract area, Hpa-an District. It split from the Karen National Union (KNU) and signed a ceasefire agreement with the Myanmar government in 2007, but refused to transform into a Border Guard Force (BGF) in 2010. It signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in October 2015.

³ The present document is based on information received on July 23rd 2020. It was provided by a community member in Mu Traw 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. The parts in square brackets are explanations added by KHRG.

⁴ Saw is a S'gaw Karen male honorific title used before a person's name.

Village	N--- village
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Part 2 - Information Quality

1. Explain in detail how you collected this information.

KHRG received a call from Karen Women's Organisation (KWO) on October 20th 2020 regarding this case. KHRG then interviewed the wife and one of the children of the victim, as well as two local village leaders (from neighbouring villages) via phone.

2. Explain how the source verified this information.

Two of the interviewees are relatives of the victim, and therefore experienced this incident first hand.

Part 3 – Complete Description of the Incident

Describe the Incident(s) in complete detail.

Sometime around 2015 [the source does not remember the exact date], there was a land dispute between Saw M---'s family and the families of two other villagers, Saw H--- and Naw⁵ T---. The Karen National Union (KNU)⁶ village head, Saw L---, along with a local elder settled the case by dividing the land between them.

Sometime around 2017 [the source does not remember the exact date], Naw T---'s husband died of throat cancer. Villagers started accusing Saw M--- of witchcraft because they saw him spitting on the night of the funeral. That same night, he and two of his friends (Saw N--- and Saw O---) disappeared. According to Saw M---'s wife, they were called by the village head and then were seen leaving with him. The next morning, their families found out that they had been put in detention for a week by the KNU/KNLA-PC's Operations Command #3 at the KNU/KNLA-PC detention facility in Ler Chaw Teh.

Their detention was ordered by Operations Commander Saw Y---. Their families were not informed about their detention, and no proper trial was held prior to the detention. According to Naw D--- (Saw M---'s wife): *"I asked my husband [and his friends] what they had done wrong to be arrested. The three of them replied to me: '[We] don't know.' [...] I also asked the [KNU/KNLA-PC] chief gatekeeper, and he replied: 'I don't know either.'"*

Naw D--- said that her husband later told her that he had been accused of witchcraft because he had lit a candle between Naw T---'s house and their house. She added that KNU/KNLA-PC soldiers beat her husband while he was detained, and that he had admitted to melting yaba⁷ with a candle there, but denied the witchcraft allegations. Prior to their release, the three detainees were forced by KNU/KNLA-PC soldiers, during a meeting in front of all the villagers, to drink spirit water and to sign a letter stating that they would stop drinking alcohol. According to Naw D---, after the meeting, the lives of Saw M--- and his family returned to normal.

Around November 2019, the witchcraft allegations resurfaced, raised by another villager, Naw E---. She had loaned money to Saw M---'s wife and fell sick after the two had an argument about returning the money. She told her brother, KNU/KNLA-PC Operations Commander Saw

⁵ Naw is a S'gaw Karen female honorific title used before a person's name.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Yaba, which means 'crazy medicine' in Thai, is a tablet form of methamphetamine.

Y---, about it. He came to Saw M---'s house and fired his gun three times while they were absent from the house. When Saw M--- heard the gunfire, he ran back to his own village, K---, in fear. His wife hurried back to the house. Saw Y--- told Naw D--- that people in the community were gossiping about her ability to craft spells. He asked her whether she had any witch stones, and told her: "*Naw E--- told me that she has not been feeling well since she asked for the money you borrowed from her.*" She replied to him: "*I do not know anything.*"

After this incident, Saw M---'s family saw several shamans. The shamans told them to undergo different rituals to expel the bad spirits from their bodies. They had to undergo these rituals in front of the other villagers, the village head, and KNU and KNU/KNLA-PC authorities. Several local shamans attested that Saw M--- and his wife were not involved in witchcraft, but gossip in the community led to further accusations nevertheless. For example, even though Saw M---'s father passed away some time ago while living in the United States, people began gossiping that he was killed due to involvement in witchcraft, and that his corpse was thrown into a river near Hpa-an. The W--- village head and monastery leader told KHRG they had never heard about these kinds of accusations against the father before.

As the gossip about the family's involvement in witchcraft grew stronger and became widespread, Naw D--- was prohibited from participating in social gatherings, including going to the local monastery. Two of their neighbours who faced many health issues, Naw H--- and Saw A---'s daughter Naw A---, called out Naw D---'s name and the name of her husband while allegedly being possessed by spirits. [According to Karen traditional beliefs, witches craft spells by calling upon and nurturing evil spirits, then send them to possess the victim(s). While being possessed, the victim may call out a name, which serves to identify the witch who 'owns' the evil spirit].

According to Naw D---, she and her husband tried their best and used all their strength and money to appease the other villagers in order to gain their trust, keep the peace and return their lives to normal. However, they could not influence the villagers targeting them. Naw D--- also told the villagers to notify her whenever someone calls out her or her husband's name as a result of alleged spirit possession, and that she would willingly be tested again by the local shamans. Nevertheless, gossip about their involvement in witchcraft kept spreading.

Saw M--- was murdered on July 10th 2020 at 8:45 pm. He died after being hit by six buckshots fired from a musket. The perpetrator could not be identified. Right after the incident, Naw D--- phoned Saw Y--- to come to the crime scene, but he did not come, nor did he attend the funeral. She extracted three buckshots from her husband's corpse as evidence, but they were later stolen by an unknown individual.

Local authorities were made aware of the killing, but no KNU/KNLA-PC authorities came to investigate the killing case, and the village head was too afraid to handle the case on his own [the KNU/KNLA-PC manages the administration of justice in this area so the village head was concerned about repercussions]. Naw D--- herself contacted KNU/KNLA-PC authorities and the village head to provide details of the killing but did not file a formal written report about the murder of her husband out of concern for the security of her family. She also wanted to maintain a positive relationship with the community and live in peace.

After the murder, Naw D--- sought out further information about the causes of the witchcraft allegations, believing them to be tied to her husband's death, but struggled to get answers. She visited shamans regularly and asked other villagers about it, but they refused to respond to her inquiries and continued to spread rumours and make allegations. For example, after Naw A---, Saw A---'s daughter, was bitten by a centipede, villagers said that Naw D--- had asked that centipede to bite her.

Naw D--- recounted this incident: "*I learned of it from one of my cousins in F---. She heard it*

from another villager in N---. So I asked the woman who was bitten by the centipede: 'I heard people say that a centipede bit you. Can you tell me what happened?' She said she did not know what she said [however others have told her that she was possessed and called the name of Naw D--- after being bit]. I also asked her older sister and she said: 'I was boiling water and walking around so I did not hear about it [she did not hear her sister calling Naw D---'s name].' The W--- village head asked the N--- village head about that case [...]. The N--- village head said: 'Yes, shaman Saw U--- tested it [assessed whether she had been possessed].' Therefore, I went to shaman Saw U--- and asked him about it. He replied that he had not met with them and that he did not do it [perform the test]."

Naw D--- and her two children were too afraid to sleep in the village after the death of Saw M--- so they have gone to sleep in another village every night since. She told KHRG: "I am afraid of my younger brother [Saw P---, who she later explains has been acting suspiciously] and the villagers because all the villagers in my village accused us of witchcraft. [...] They [KNU/KNLA-PC leaders] live just beside my house so I am afraid of all of them, including [KNU/KNLA-PC] soldiers. [...] [Operations Commander] Saw Y--- came [to my house] and yelled at me, so I am afraid of him."

Naw D--- and her son suspect Naw D---'s younger brother Saw P--- of the murder. Naw D---'s brother is addicted to alcohol and drugs, and had previously been violent towards Naw D--- and her husband on several occasions. At the time, she informally told the village head about it, to no avail: "Whenever I discussed this issue with the village head, he always said he could not do it [do anything] and that I had to meet with Saw Y--- [to handle such cases]. [...] He also said that he was afraid too [to handle such cases independently]."

Since the murder and the funeral, her brother's actions and some things he has been saying indicate that he knows about or was involved in the murder. Below are some of the statements that aroused her suspicion:

- While talking to himself: "Since the right amount was put [the Karen verb used specifically refers to the filling of a musket with buckshot] in it, it was done [he died] right away." Naw D--- is not certain that he was referring to the murder of Saw M---, but thinks it is a possibility since he had never spoken of such things prior to her husband's murder.
- August 17th 2020, while talking to himself: "They will know [how it feels] if any of them falls in a trap like their father [in Karen, the use of 'they will know' is taken as an ominous warning and in some cases a threat]."
- August 17th 2020, addressing Naw D---'s family: "The children and [wife] of the witch will not sleep with us [under our roof] if we do not offer the right food [to calm the evil spirits allegedly 'owned' by the family]."

With the situation still unresolved and further witchcraft accusations being made against Naw D---, her family ultimately had to move to a safe house belonging to the KWO in Hpa-an District for security reasons. This was arranged by local leaders. She had to leave her village, house, livestock, two-wheel walking tractor, motorcycle, unharvested paddy field and all of her household items behind. At the moment, one of her relatives looks after those properties for her. Naw D--- also had to sell all of her buffalos. She stated: "Even though he [my husband] left us, if we have a home, we will be able to live in peace. We had to leave our house, livestock and everything is now completely out of reach [she cannot access her belongings and properties because she lives in a different place]."

Because of the on-going witchcraft allegations, Naw D--- has fallen into depression and is now living in fear, so she cannot even think about accessing justice anymore. In her words: "Currently, I cannot think about anything. Everything is complicated for me so I just depend on

whatever will be done [...]. The leaders can do what they should do for me, I cannot think of anything now. [...]. I want you [leaders] to consider my security and rights, to help me think about whether I should [formally] report the case or not. [...] I just want peace and safety. I always have to live in fear so I desire security. [...] If possible, I want to go home.”

The murder happened in July 2020. Local authorities, including the KNU/KNLA-PC and the KNU know about the incident, however, none have taken any action even to investigate the incident. Without any investigation, there will be no possibility of holding the perpetrator accountable and ensuring justice for Saw M---’s family. The inaction of the local authorities regarding this incident also raises suspicion about the involvement of armed actors in this crime. According to the W--- village head, witchcraft accusations are an on-going, problematic issue in the community. This is not the first time that a household in the area has had to flee to another location for their security because of witchcraft accusations. If the local authorities do not take action regarding this witchcraft-related killing, it will probably happen again in the future.

Part 4 - Permission for Using the Details

Did the victim(s) provide permission to use this information? Explain how that permission was provided.

Naw D--- and her son gave KHRG permission to use this information.



This photo was taken on November 2nd 2020 in W--- village, Htoh Kaw Koh village tract, T’Nay Hsah Township, Hpa-an District.

It shows a printed picture of Saw M---’s corpse. It was provided to KHRG by his wife.

[Photo: KHRG]

Further background reading on witchcraft-related human rights violations in Southeast Myanmar can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- [“Three separate killing incidents based on witchcraft suspicion in Hpa-an District”](#), (July 2017)
- [“Hpa-an Interview: Naw A---, September 2016”](#), (July 2017)
- [“Dooplaya Incident Report: Killing in Kyainseikgyi Township, March 2015”](#), (May 2016)

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.khrg.org.

Hpa-an District (Central Kayin State)

