



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

August 17, 2015 / KHRG #15-14-A6-I1

Toungoo Interview: Naw A---, January 2015

This Interview with Naw A--- describes events and issues occurring in Thandaunggyi Township, Toungoo District, during January 2015, including land confiscation, development projects, healthcare and education.

- *Villagers are concerned about land confiscation for an industrial zone planned nearby Toungoo Town and have sent complaint letters to the Burma/Myanmar government requesting that they terminate the company's development projects.*
 - *Naw A--- mentioned that students have failed examinations due to old teachers being replaced with new, younger teachers. The children do not fully understand school lessons due to the low standard of teaching by the new teachers.*
 - *Naw A--- stated that there is a group from a neighbouring village that provides medical care and medicines to the villagers.*
-

Interview | Naw A---, (female, 39), B--- village, Thandaunggyi Township, Toungoo District (January 2015)

The following Interview was conducted by a community member trained by KHRG to monitor local human rights conditions. It was conducted in Toungoo District in January 2015 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 Toungoo District, including five other interviews, 103 photographs and 20 video clips.²

Ethnicity:

Religion: Christian

Marital Status: Married

Occupation: Farming

Position: Villager

¹ KHRG trains community members in southeast 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 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 southeast Burma/Myanmar, 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.

What is your name?

I am Naw A---.

How old are you?

I am 39 years old.

Where do you live?

I live in B--- [village].

Township?

Thandaunggyi Township.

Occupation?

Farming.

[Do you do] anything else?

No.

Married?

Yes.

How many people in your family?

Five people.

How old is your eldest child?

14 years old.

How about the youngest?

Five years old.

How many houses are there in B--- village?

Over [censored for security].

What ethnic groups are in the village?

Karen and Burmese people.

How about religion?

Buddhist and Christian.

Are you Buddhist or Christian?

I am Christian.

Baptist or Anglican?

Baptist.

What do most people do here?

We do farming.

What is the situation [in terms of] land confiscation by companies after the ceasefire?³

Not in the past.⁴

How about now?

Yes.

What are the problems and how did they happen?

Currently, we do farming and they said they will confiscate our farmland. We depend on these farmlands and we do not want them to be confiscated. That is why we are now protecting [our] land from confiscation.

Who said that [the land is] going to be confiscated?

They [other villagers] said the company will confiscate the farmland.

Which company?

They said [the Burma/Myanmar government is cooperating with the company to set up an] industrial zone. I don't know the name of the company.

Do you know the name of their manager?

No, I don't.

You don't know any of them?

No, I don't.

Where is the company from?

I don't know where they are from but the place that they are going to confiscate [land] from is in [the newly built] Kay Tu Ma Ti Myo Thit [Town] next to Toungoo [Town] area on the western outskirts of the town.

³ On January 12th 2012, a preliminary ceasefire agreement was signed between the KNU and Burma/Myanmar government in Hpa-an. Negotiations for a longer-term peace plan are still under way. For updates on the peace process, see the KNU Stakeholder webpage on the Myanmar Peace Monitor website. For KHRG's analysis of changes in human rights conditions since the ceasefire, see [*Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response since the 2012 ceasefire*](#), KHRG, May 2014.

⁴ By 'not in the past' the interviewee means that currently the company is confiscating land.

All the farms on the western outskirts of Kay Tu Ma Ti Myo Thit?

No, not all. They said they are going to confiscate [from] Mok Hso Taung Kwin and Myeh Maw Kwin [village areas].

[From] two [village areas]?

Yes, that [is] what we heard.

You heard this last year?

This year.

In 2015?

No, December 2014.

How did you find out about it?

We heard from the superiors [township leaders] and they notified our administrator and our administrator told all villagers in our village and our neighboring villages like C--- and D---.

What are they planning for the local people?

They said they are going to confiscate [land] and we can't stand this and we do not understand how to respond to them. We consulted with the township officers [about the land confiscation] and [the township officers helped them to send the complaint letter].

You sent a complaint letter?

Yes.

Do people [farmers] here have land grant documents?

Yes.

How many acres of farmland do you have?

Ten acres, altogether.

They [farmers] all have land grants?

Yes, they do.

Can the [company] legally confiscate the farmland that [the farmers] have land grants [for]?

Many of our lands have land grants. Since we do farming we have land grants for all farmland. Now they are going to confiscate [our land] and now [we] cannot let them confiscate our farmland as we have farmland land grants. They cannot confiscate our land.

Do you have land Form #7?⁵

We did not apply for land Form #7 so we do not have that. We did not know [about land Form #7] at that time.

Currently, are there people who have applied for the land Form #7?

Yes.

How much [money] do they [Burma/Myanmar government land department officers] ask for [when] applying [for] one acre of land?

They asked [for] 7,000 kyat (US \$6.26)⁶ for each acre of land.

Are the villagers satisfied with this?

Some can afford to pay and some cannot but this is what they demand [for permission to work on the land] so we have to pay. That is the way it is.

People here in this area can get Form #7 with 7,000 kyat?

Some people have got it, but some people have not got it yet.

So there are people who do not have [Form] #7?

Yes, for us we missed [the] Form #7 [process when they conducted land registration] as our village is remote [from the towns]. It takes three hours for us to get to our farm [on foot from our village]. We usually live in the jungle village and it is far [from town] so we did not know when they initiated [the] land Form #7 [process]. Another thing is I was unhealthy [when they conducted land registration] and I was in the hospital. My daughter and my aunt were at home in the village and they did not know [that the government was conducting land registration]. We could not apply which is why we did not get it. Some people applied for two acres of land paying 14,000 kyat (US \$12.78) but they did not get it.

The 7,000 kyat cost for [applying] for each acre of land is set by the superior leaders [Burma/Myanmar government land department], is there corruption within the [local] land department? What I heard is we⁷ do not need to pay this much [7,000 kyat].

I do not know [how the] superiors [Burma/Myanmar government land department, makes decisions on how much to charge] but what they [local land department] asked [for] was 7,000 kyat, 14,000 kyat for two acres of land.

Approximately, how many acres of land are there that [the] company is going to confiscate in Mok Hso Taung Kwin and Myeh Maw Kwin [village area]?

⁵ Form #7 is the application form needed to apply for a land grant to farm land under the Burma/Myanmar government 2012 Farmland Law. The law stipulates that land use laws in place prior to 2012 have been revoked. The land grants that the villager refers to earlier in the interview are likely to be no longer recognised by the Burma/Myanmar government. Land in Burma/Myanmar is ultimately owned by the Burma/Myanmar government. For details see: Burma/Myanmar 2012 [Farmland Law](#).

⁶ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the 22nd May 2015 official market rate of 1,095 kyat to the US \$1.

⁷ The researcher is also a villager and this tax imposed occurs in his village and on his land as well.

Over 100 acres of land.

When did you submit the complaint letter?

I cannot remember when they submitted it.

Who submitted [it and] where did they submit [it]?

Our *Saya* [respected person]⁸ went to the town and submitted it [the complaint letter]. They went on Monday. What date was Monday?

It was [January] 5th [2015] if it was Monday.

Yes, it was [the] 5th then.

So you have not heard anything yet?

No, not yet.

Where did he submit [the complaint letter]?

In Toungoo Town. According to our *Saya* Z---, they [government officials] said they will send the letter from Toungoo to Naypyidaw.

From how many villages [do they plan to confiscate land]?

E--- village, F--- village, G--- village, D--- village, B--- village and H--- village.

Six villages altogether?

Yes.

[From six villages] altogether they plan to confiscate only 100 acres of land?

Yes, I mean 100 acres of land confiscated is from Mok Hso Taung Kwin and Myeh Maw Kwin [village area] only. I guess there will be over 200 acres of lands which will be confiscated altogether [including in the other villages mentioned above].

You do not know the name of the company and company manager?

No, I do not. The [village leaders] might know but I do not know.

In your village, do children have freedom and [are they] ok with their school regarding their education?

They are not doing well [with their education]. We have many different problems. We have more problems this year, because last year our head mistress was *Sayama* Daw S---. She moved to another place as she had problems with the other teachers.

One of her subordinate teachers also moved to another place. [There is] only [one] male teacher and two new teachers left. The teachers teach in their own different way [as they

⁸ A *Saya* in Burmese is a male teacher, but the term is often used to refer to an elder or respected person, as in this context.

are unqualified] and the children [learn] nothing [as they do not fully understand the lessons]. This is why our children went [somewhere] to take [an] exam twice, in October and December, but the children did not pass the exam. They [the children] know nothing. Like my daughter, she is 12 years old and she is in fourth standard and she knows nothing.

Up to what standard does the school have?

It is up to fourth standard.

So it is primary school?

Yes, it is.

Where did they go for the examination?

In E--- village.

No one passed the examination?

None of them passed the exam. They took the exam three times in a year and my daughter was one of them. No one passed.

How many teachers are there [in the school]?

[There were] five teachers in the past, two teachers moved away and now three teachers [are] left. There is one male teacher and two female teachers.

The teachers are from here or from where?

They are from Toungoo Town. One of [the] female teachers is from Aok Twin [village], [the] male teacher is from Toungoo [Town] and the other teacher is from Toungoo [Town] as well.

How many students are there?

Over 70 students.

It is free for primary school?

Yes, it is.

How long has [the school] been [free]?

It has been [free for] two years already.

Where [do] the students go after they complete primary school?

They go to D--- village. This school goes up to eighth standard.

[It is a] middle school?

Yes, it is.

How about after [middle school] at D--- village?

After [staying at middle school] at D--- village, they [students] can also go to I--- [village]. In I---, they have up to tenth standard.⁹ From I---, they go to J--- and then they go to Toungoo [Town for further education] or other places.

How much [salary do] the teachers earn?

I do not know that.

Is there a clinic or hospital in your village?

No.

Where do you go if you villagers are ill?

If we are sick [we call the medics] from D--- village and they come and give medical treatment [to villagers].

How many medics are there [in D--- village]?

Only two medics.

Is there any development by other NGOs [non-governmental organisations] in this village? [Do they] supply water or distribute things, etc?

Yes, there is. They come once or twice a month. They come more often in [the] summer.

Do you know the name of the NGOs?

The group that provides medicines is from I--- [village]. A Christian group from Toungoo [headed by] doctor Sheh Roh Paw distributes [medicines].

Is that free?

Yes. They heal [illnesses] in a short time.

And for the water supply are there things like [NGOs] digging artesian wells?

They tried last year. It was at the entrance of the village under the rain tree.¹⁰ *Ka La* (or *Kaw La Thu*)¹¹ people came and did it. For that one I can only use a machine [to get water]. They [*Kaw La Thu*] never use the well.

Is it ok [using it]?

[It is] not ok. [It is] not useful.

What other problems are there in this village? [Access to] water?

⁹ In tenth standard you are 17/18 which is equivalent to US grade 12.

¹⁰ A rain tree is a species of flowering tree in the pea family.

¹¹ *Kaw La Thu*, “thu” meaning black, is a S’gaw Karen term which is sometimes used to refer to individuals in Burma/Myanmar who are perceived to have a darker skin colour. In Kayin state, it is often associated specifically with followers of Islam (Muslims), although this association is sometimes erroneous, and Muslim individuals do not typically self-identify with this term.

No. And another thing is [there is no] clinic. We have no clinic to get medicines [for sickness] in the village and for the children who are patients [and] in critical [condition] we have to run to the [Toungoo] Town hospital. We cannot afford to pay for expensive clinics like Taw Win clinic or Kay Tu clinic [meaning they go to clinics in neighboring villages except these two clinics]. We just went [to the] old hospital [for medical treatment].

Are there things like NGOs coming in and cooperating with the village leaders [for village development]?

No. We do not have anything like that.

In my village there used to be water scarcity, but people [NGOs] came and helped with this. If you get a chance to submit the proposal for your village needs, do it then.

I have not had such things. This year, an uncle¹² talked about water [issues to a NGO]. He did not talk about it before. In the past there were no groups [of people] who are coming in like you Saya.

Are there any armed groups coming into this area?

No.

Are there people who do not have enough food for each year in this village?

Yes, there are.

How do they [villagers] help out one another?

There is no support from the [Burma/Myanmar] government, but like me I have farmland and I asked people to work on my farmland [for a share of the profit or for some rice]. This year [2014], people go and do chainsaw logging and have migrated to China and Bangkok. We do not have men to work on our land which is why we cannot find workers [to work on our land and share the rice or have a share of the profit]. There are five acres of my lands that are available for work. We cannot work on all these five acres of farmland. We can work only on two acres of our farmlands because my husband is over 60 years old already. We do not have a son and me and my daughter work on it [the farm] and do what we can [for our livelihoods]. This year, I worked on two [acres] of my land and I used seven baskets (224 kg. / 492.8 lb.)¹³ of paddy seeds to sow crops and during the harvesting we got 180 [baskets of paddy] (3,762 kg. / 8,294.4 lb.). It helps us with our livelihoods. Sometimes [we are] unlucky [have nothing to eat], but we just have to work by ourselves. There is no support from the government. Sometimes, people [in other villages] just give [us food for free] to eat.

After farming we make thatch shingles and we sell them [for money]. We use it for our expenses in the kitchen [use the money to buy food] and other social occasions [e.g. full

¹² *Pa Dtee* or *Dtee* is a familiar S'gaw Karen term of respect attributed to an older man that translates to "uncle," but it does not necessarily signify any actual familial relationship.

¹³ 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.

moon ceremony, water festival]. That is why we cannot lose [the] thatch shingles area [forest].

How far is your village from Toungoo Town?

Nowadays we go with a car. In the past there was no vehicle road. If we left from here [B--- village] at five am, arrive at I--- village at nine am, and took a car there [we would] get to Toungoo Town when it was dark. In 2012, the road went through to E--- village so we [would] walk to E--- and then take [a] car from E--- village [to Toungoo Town]. [It was] not much different; we [would still] get to Toungoo Town when it [was] getting dark. It is ok this year [travelling in summer]. There are three cars in G--- [village]. Two trucks travel back and forth. [In the rainy season], we leave [from G--- village] at six am and arrive back at three or four pm. It is better than in the past.

Was there a car road in the past?

Yes, there was. In the past we constructed it with people [villagers] only. The car and oxcarts [would] travel on it and the road was damaged. Now, we have a vehicle road which only cars use, no oxcarts.

The government constructed that road?

I don't think it was done by the government.

[It was done] by villagers or a company?

I guess it was done by a company.

Was it done [a] long time ago?

Not [a] long time [ago]. It was [done] in the rainy season. It was not done by a company either.¹⁴ In the beginning we formed the road by hoeing [the soil ourselves]. Now, they [Dat Taing Group]¹⁵ came and built [electrical] pylons in our village, they flattened the road in our village but we cannot use it [the road] in rainy season. It is fine in summer.

Cars cannot travel in rainy season?

No, they cannot because they did not [layer] it [the road] with [small] rocks.

You have to walk in rainy season?

Yes, as I was saying we have to go to G--- village on foot [to go to Toungoo Town]. We first formed the road and the Dat Taing Group [the group that came and built pylons] flattened the road with [a] bulldozer. I think [villagers] had to pay [Dat Taing Group] for the road to be flattened.

What is the [official] name of Dat Taing Group?

I do not know. I know them as Dat Taing Group.

¹⁴ Here, Naw A---'s answer contradicts her previous statement that it was probably done by a company. Naw A--- remembers more details about who built the road as she talks to the KHRG researcher..

¹⁵ According to the interview, the villager did not know the official name of the Dat Taing Group, but usually this is a group sent by the government department tasked with installing electrical pylons.

Was it in 2012?

In 2014, in rainy season.

So the [situation] is better in terms of travelling?

Yes.

Do you have anything to mention that I missed from my questions?

You have asked quite perfectly.

It is time for you to mention finally [is there anything more you would like to say?]

What I wish [for] my village is we need more water sources. In my area we have only one water source so we want more. Another thing is it will be good if we have [a] clinic in our village so that we do not need to go to other places to seek medical treatment in a clinic or hospital.

Thank you.

Thanks.

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

- “Toungoo situation update: Thandaunggyi and Htantabin townships, November 2014 to February 2015,” (July 2015)
- *‘With only our voices, what can we do?’: Land confiscation and local response in southeast Myanmar*, (June 2015)
- “Toungoo situation update: Thandaunggyi Township, July to November 2014,” (April 2015)
- “Toungoo situation update: Thandaunggyi and Htantabin townships, November 2014,” (February 2015)
- “Ongoing militarisation of southeastern Burma/Myanmar since the January 2012 ceasefire agreement between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Burma/Myanmar government,” (February 2015)

Taw Oo (Toungoo) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)