



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

October 15, 2015 / KHRG #15-14-A4-I1

Toungoo Interview: Naw A---, January 2015

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

- Villagers heard that a company is coming to the area to implement a development project for which they will confiscate land in B--- village, as well as in nearby villages. The villagers submitted a complaint letter to the township administrators stating their objection to the project, as they were afraid that their lands for which they do not have land grants will be confiscated.
 - Students are receiving a poor education as school teachers are often absent, as they frequently leave the village to visit their homes, which can take up to two weeks per trip. Further to this, some of them have expressed that they do not want to teach at all.
 - As there is no health clinic in B--- village, villagers must travel to Toungoo Town for medicine or treatment whenever they are sick.
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Interview | Naw A---, (female, 46), 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 six other interviews, 103 photographs and 20 video clips.²

Ethnicity: Karen

Religion: Baptist

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 aunty?³

My name is Naw A---.

How old are you?

I am 46 years old.

What do you do [for work]?

I do farming.

Is there anything else that you do?

No, nothing.

Where do you live?

I live in B--- village.

The village is situated in which township?

In Taw Oo [Toungoo].⁴

Do you have a family?

Yes.

How many people [are there] in your family?

[There are] nine people in my family.

How old is your eldest [child]?

Twenty-four years old.

How about the youngest one?

The youngest is four years old.

How long have you been living here?

I came here to this village when I was over ten years old.

When exactly?

I can't remember but we have been living here for about 30 or 40 years already.

Where did you live before?

Mu Theh, in Ler Doh [Kyaukkyi] Township area, [Nyaunglebin District].

³ Aunty is a Karen term of respect attributed to an elder female, and does not necessarily signify any actual familial relationship.

⁴ Naw A--- is referring to Toungoo Town area, which is in Thandaunggyi Township, Toungoo District.

When you first came [to this village] how many houses were there?

There were only two or three houses.

Did you have any problems when you moved here?

My father did logging and farming when I first came here to this village. We did farming and I got married and we settled down here.

Currently, how many houses are there [in the village]?

There are now *[censored for security]* houses.

How about religion? What do most people believe in?

[Most people are] Baptist.

Are there any armed groups that have harassed [people in] your village or burnt down your village?

No.

How about after the ceasefire?⁵ Are there any cases such as rich people coming in and confiscating the land?

No, but now [land confiscation] is going to happen.

How will it happen?

We heard [that] a company will come to [the village area] and confiscate our lands. We heard that they will pay us compensation. However, if we sell our lands to them we will not have any land to work on. That is why we have to stop them.

Which company? Do you know the name of the company?

Kay Too Ma Tee Development [Company].

Where is the company from?

[They are] from Taw Oo [Toungoo] [Town].

[Where is the] company from? Just Taw Oo [Toungoo] or other places?

[They are just] from Taw Oo [Toungoo] [Town].

Do you know the company leaders' or managers' names?

I do not know [their names].

When did you hear about it? A long time ago, or a short period of time ago? Just months?

⁵ 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.

Yes. Not even a year ago.

[Do] the farms that you work on have land grants?

I have land grants but not for all [of my] lands. In the past they [Burma/Myanmar government land surveyors] [conducted land surveys]; some people might have four or five acres [of land] but they applied [saying they] only have two acres of lands. In the past they [villagers] have to pay either rice or money [as tax per acre of land]. That is why they [villagers] applied saying they have less land [so they do not have to pay as much tax]. Another thing [the government land surveyors] said, “*You [villagers] have to apply [for permission to work on your land] and pay 7,000 kyat (US \$6.43)⁶ for each [acre of land you intend to work on].*”

They said this recently [or a] long time ago?

Not very long ago. It was last year [2014].

[You heard this] from [the government] land surveyor?

Land surveyors award land grants in the monasteries. They [the villagers] have to apply for land grants [for their lands] which have no [documents]. They [land surveyors] will confiscate the land if they [villagers] do not apply [for land grants].

How many acres of land do you currently have?

Fifteen acres in total [but only] five [acres] have land grants, the rest do not.

How many of your lands have land grants?

Three acres of my lands have one land grant and [a further] two acres have [another] land grant.

Five acres of your land already have land grants?

Yes. And we forbade [the company from confiscating] the rest of the lands.

You heard that a company will come and confiscate land?

Like my farm, if people [land surveyors] measure truthfully it would be seven or eight acres [of land]. We have to pay 7,000 kyat (US \$6.43) for each acre and apply [for permission to work on them]. This is why we applied for only a few acres [of our land].

How many villages are going to have land confiscated?

Five: Bay Tha Nee Teh Kon [village], Wet Khauk Sein [village], Mya [village], Thet Kel Kyay [village] and Pauk Hseik village.

Five villages? How about the other villages?

Sin Hswel Myaw village?

Yes, will that village be included [in the land confiscation]?

⁶ All conversion estimates for the kyat in this report are based on the May 21st 2015 official market rate of 1,088 kyat to the US \$1.

No.

Are these villages Karen or Burmese villages?

Only Bay Tha Nee Teh Kon village is Karen. The rest of the villages are Burmese.

Lands from most villages that you mentioned do not have [land grants] right?

No, like my village, B---, no one has [land grants].⁷

I mean for the farmlands.

For the farmlands some people have [land grants].

On which day did they [villagers] submit the objection letter?⁸

I did not ask them [villagers who submitted the objection letter].

Did [villagers from] all five villages submit the objection letter?

Yes, they [villagers from the other villages] also submitted [the objection letter], but they do not know when they [township leaders] will get back to them.

How many acres are there that they [villagers] prohibited [the company] from confiscating?

From only our B--- village?

Yes. Do you know [how many acres] the land owners objected to?

I am not sure if they said 400 or 4,000 acres of land. I am not sure if it was 4,000 or 1,002 acres of land or 20 acres. I did not ask them [the villagers]. Their names are in the objection letter. It might be in the hundreds [of acres of land].

Over four hundred [acres]?

[Naw A--- did not answer].

Was there any reply after [the villagers] sent the objection letter?

No, not yet.

For the other villages [not previously mentioned], the company is not going to confiscate their lands?

They have not come in [to those villages] yet. They [currently] are in Hpaw Say Hpeh [village]. They have started buying [lands], but I am not sure if it is the company [Kay Too Ma Tee Development] or whatever [other wealthy individuals]. We heard that they have started buying [lands].

⁷ Here, Naw A--- is referring to village areas where houses are situated, as opposed to lands used for farming.

⁸ Although Naw A--- has yet not mentioned the objection letter during the interview, the KHRG researcher may have been previously aware that the villagers had submitted one.

You have to pay 7,000 kyat (US \$6.43) to apply [to work on] each acre of land. Are the villagers okay with this?

Not all the villagers applied [for permission to work on the land]. They applied for only a few [acres] of their lands, because the more land that they apply to work on, the more money they have to pay. It is like that.

You [villagers] sent the objection letter?

Yes, like they [land surveyors] said, the company will come in and they are going to confiscate the farmlands that do not have documents. That is why the villagers sent the objection letter.

Did they [land surveyors] say when they [the company] are coming?

No they did not. Firstly, we have seen that they [have begun] to clear the land and we heard that they will clear [the rest of the land] and then sell it. I heard that the villagers [whose lands have already been cleared] are from Wet Khauk Sein village; after [the land was cleared] I heard from people who knew about it. I did not know about it before. Later on, we heard that the company is coming to look for land to buy. I do not know how much more land they need. They [land surveyors] are saying that they are going to take more land, so [this is why] the villagers submitted the objection letter.

Regarding education, is there a school in your village?

Yes, there is.

Up to what standard [is the school]?

Up to fourth standard.⁹

[It is a] primary school?

Yes, it is.

Is the school free [for students to attend]?

No, the teachers who come to teach go home often. They come and teach for only 20 days each month. They go back to their [villages] and sometimes it takes 10, 14 or 15 days [for each visit] and the students are not learning.¹⁰

How many male teachers and female teachers are there?

[There is] one male teacher and three female teachers.

Where are the teachers from?

I do not know where they are from. They are Burmese. They come to the village and do not socialise [with] the villagers.

[Did] they [villagers] build houses for them?

⁹ A Standard refers to a grade in the Burmese education system. Primary school runs from Standard 1 to Standard 4, middle school is Standards 5-8 and high school is Standards 9-10.

¹⁰ Although the researcher asked if education was free, Naw A--- responded with an answer about the weaknesses of the school, more specifically the teachers.

Yes, [villagers built] the house and the school. They are self-reliant. The teachers currently are not trying to socialise with the villagers; they just stay on their own. The teachers in the past visited the villagers. Some [current] teachers said to some of the students that they teach: *“I am teaching not because of having good-will, [not because I want to] but because I have a duty to teach.”*

[Do] the teachers change yearly?

Some teachers moved [to other places] because they had problems with villagers as they were corrupt and they dared not stay a long time.¹¹ Some teachers did not teach full-time. They taught as [and when] they wanted. The villagers talked to them about it and they did not like this and they requested to move [to another village]. Now, young teachers are coming [to teach]. Anywhere that you live you have to deal with the students' parents and the students. They should be mutually visiting with one another. Currently, it is not like that. They let the students play and they will sleep [or be] on their phone. This is why the students are not doing well in their education.

How much [salary] do they get monthly?

They said 100,000 kyat (US \$91.85) or over 100,000 kyat. Moreover, the villagers [also] have to support them [the teachers]. Each of the students' parents has to provide two milk tins (0.50 kg. or 1.10 lb.)¹² of rice to the teachers. For firewood, each house has to provide one bundle of firewood each month.

They just come and stay without working?

That is what [I am saying]. We are ok with providing [rice and firewood] but we want our students taught well. We will support whatever they [the students] need. There is a big weakness with the teachers.

How long have they been gone [back to their home villages]?

They left around the 10th [December 2014]. They just got back yesterday [January 6th 2015]. They come and teach in the jungle [remote areas] and the education minister does not come [to check] so they [teachers] are just working out of duty [not for the improvement of the students' education].

How many students are there?

There are over 100 students according to the students that I saw.

How much are the school fees? Is the school free [for students to attend]?

Yes [it is free], it has been [free for] two years and the [Burma/Myanmar] government [provides] support but not really fully: one dozen books, one bag, two pencils, and 1,000 kyat [to each student]. For the one backpack that the teacher brings, it might be from Karen Education Department's [KED] side. They provide one rice box, one umbrella and one backpack. That might be from the [Karen] Education Department.

They are the group that support the students?

¹¹ The community member did not provide further information as to the details of what Naw A--- meant by the previous teachers having been corrupt.

¹² A milk tin is a unit of volume used to measure paddy, milled rice and seeds. One milk tin is equivalent to 0.16 kg. or 0.36 lb. of paddy, and 0.25 kg. or 0.55 lb. of milled rice. It is also equal to 1/64 of a big tin.

Yes, they are. They are KNU [Karen National Union] employees. They are not related to the [Burma/Myanmar] government.

Is there a clinic in the village?

Here?

Yes.

No, if your children get sick you have to carry them to the hospital.

Where?

In Taw Oo [Toungoo] [Town].

[Are there] any closer clinics?

No, it [would be] good if we had a medic [in the village]. Currently we have to carry each other [to the hospital] if we feel sick.

Is there a mid-wife [in the village]?

There is [a mid-wife] in Wet Khauk Sein village. Here in this village, we just treat [mothers] in a traditional way.

Both education and healthcare [improvement] are priority needs?

Yes, they are. Our children here who are in third or fourth standard, they cannot read or write correctly. They [teachers] stay on their own. The children have to play if they [the teachers] ask the children to play. It has been many years that we have been dealing with the young teachers.

Do the villagers have collective activities [village agency strategies] like organising each other and requesting the government [to build a clinic in the village]? Have NGOs [non-governmental organisations] come and visited here?

Yes, they [have] come.

Did you request the NGOs [to build a clinic in the village]?

We did but we do not know what they [NGO] thought.

Which NGO group? Are they [NGO workers] Karen?

They are Karen. Thra R---'s daughter is one of them. She works [in B--- village] and in Ler Doh [Town] as well.

You [villagers] can go only to Taw Oo [Toungoo] [Town] [for treatment]?

Yes, it is a problem during rainy season.

[There are] no other places [clinics or hospitals] to go to near this village?

No, there are not. Baw Gyi village does not have a clinic or hospital either.

Really?

Yes, so if you are seriously ill you have to go quickly. It is not easy [to survive] if you do not go quickly.

Is it [the situation] getting better regarding transportation?

Yes, a little. It is better in hot season. If it is rainy season you have to carry the sick, as you can only go on foot.

A car cannot go?

No, they cannot [because of the mud]. Even a motorbike cannot go on the road. That is why like you said education and healthcare [improvement] is a big need here.

Is there any company [which] does gold mining here?

No, not yet.

They [have] not confiscated [land] yet?

Yes, they have started land confiscation in Hpaw Say [Hpaw Say Hpeh village] already.

Is that a Burmese village?

Yes. It is a Burmese village. They have confiscated a lot of [land] already.

Thanks, do you have anything to say finally? [Is there] anything that you want to express regarding your problems or experiences?

Regarding problems, for us living here in this place we can survive only when we have land, with no land we cannot survive. If these things [land confiscation] keep happening to our children in the future, there will be no improvement.

Thank you.

Yes, thanks.

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

- “Toungoo Photo Set: Militarisation in Thandaunggyi Township, December 2014 to February 2015,” (October 2015)
- “Toungoo Situation Update: Thandaunggyi Township, January to February 2015,” (October 2015)
- “Toungoo Interview: Naw A---, January 2015,” (August 2015)
- “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)

Taw Oo (Toungoo) District



Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG)