



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

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“We must win this movement”: Interviews with anti-coup protesters in Southeast Myanmar



This photo was taken on March 9th 2021 on the Asia Highway near Kawkareik Town, Aw Hpa Hpa Doh village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. It shows some of the protective gear that protesters began using in order to shield themselves from SAC violence during the protests. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Introduction

Since the military coup on February 1st 2021,¹ KHRG has interviewed a number of people who have been heavily active in the anti-coup protests. In so many cases, what we find are regular citizens, who, deeply aware of the atrocities committed by the military under previous regimes and the negative impact of military rule on the country, are committed to ending military dictatorship, not just in the present but for all future generations in Myanmar. For many who have taken to the streets, the defence of human rights has become a necessity, a life-or-death situation, where the only choice is to choose to fight: for justice and their future. In order to ensure that these voices are heard, KHRG is publishing several interviews as a news bulletin. The interviews that appear in this news bulletin took place in early March 2021, during a period of heavy protest movements, and at a time when violence and crackdowns against protesters were increasing. Both interviewees evoke the need for protests to continue, and for people to stay united.

The first interview highlights the situation in Kawkareik Town, Kawkareik Township, Dooplaya District, where, according to the two interviewees, A--- (male, 31) and B--- (male, 27), there have been fewer protests than in other areas, and fewer people willing to go out in the streets to stand up against the military. They seek to communicate to fellow civilians that everyone must take part in the protests (not just a few), in order to send a clear message that the military's actions are not acceptable to the people of Myanmar. The interviewees also point out that it is critical that civilians feel that they are being supported by other stakeholders, so that they do not feel alone in this fight. They need others to stand with them and beside them. The arrest of protesters has increased fear among civilians and forced many to go into hiding. Although the interviewees point out that civilians have also been informing on each other, even when there does not appear to be pressure placed on them by security forces, such problems speak mostly to the wider culture of insecurity created by the military long before the February 1st coup. The interviewees speak of living conditions under military rule in the past, and emphasise how this was not living. That is also why they feel urgency in the need for everyone to openly and actively protest against the dictatorship. For them, the choice is simple, die in order to defend democracy and civilian rule, or die living under the military dictatorship: *"If we are afraid to die this time [for this cause] and just do nothing about it [the military dictatorship], our lives will be dead forever. Our daughters' and sons' children; our new generations' lives will be dead as well."*

The second interview presents the perspective of a 47-year-old shopkeeper, C---, from a rural village in Dooplaya District. Like the other two interviewees, she stresses the need to protect future generations from military abuse and indiscriminate violence, adding that it is for future generations, not older people like herself, that she fights. The interviewee underscores that, although the State Administration Council (SAC)² accuses civilians of breaking the law and disrupting the peace, the people of Myanmar would not have to take to the streets and protest if the military had not already broken the law by seizing power from the civilian government. She discusses how rural villagers were prevented from joining the larger protests in Kyainseikgyi

¹ On February 1st 2021, the Myanmar military deposed the democratically elected government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military proclaimed a year-long state of emergency and transferred power to Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar's Armed Forces. Based on unproven fraud allegations, the Tatmadaw invalidated the landslide victory of the NLD in the November 2020 General Election and stated it would hold new elections at the end of the state of emergency. The coup d'état occurred the day before the Parliament of Myanmar was due to swear in the members elected during the 2020 election. Elected President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained, along with ministers, their deputies and members of Parliament.

² The State Administration Council (SAC) is the executive governing body created in the aftermath of the February 1st 2021 military coup. It was established by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on February 2nd 2021, and is composed of eight military officers and eight civilians. The chairperson serves as the de facto head of government of Myanmar and leads the Military Cabinet of Myanmar, the executive branch of the government. Min Aung Hlaing assumed the role of SAC chairperson following the coup.

Town due to the blocking of Chyaung Nit Khwa Bridge, and were forced to carry out their protest at the bridge itself. In doing so, the interviewee highlights not only the eagerness of rural villagers to take part in the protests, but their tenacity in the face of obstacles. She also speaks of her disappointment in realising that the Karen Border Guard Force (BGF)³ had ordered the blocking of the bridge. Although the BGF has operated as a subdivision of the Tatmadaw⁴ since 2010, BGF soldiers are increasingly being deployed by the SAC military in clashes with the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA)⁵ since the coup and to provide “security” in areas where the soldiers may have more “local knowledge”.⁶ This has increased tensions, and the sense of ethnic betrayal, particularly since, C--- believes, Karen soldiers are stopping Karen civilians from protesting against dictatorship. For her, such a scenario instils great concern for the future of the country: *“Our country will end in devastation, and no one will be able to stop it.”* Nevertheless, she continues the fight. She has memories of the 8888 Uprising,⁷ and the violence that ensued. Because the current demonstrations are rooted in the spirit of peaceful action, she maintains some hope, stating: *“There is no way to disagree with these protests”*.

Overall, the two interviews provide testament to the strength of the people of Myanmar and their willingness to stand up for democracy and human rights. Now, close to 12 months since the coup, KHRG hopes that their words may serve as reminders of the strength of regular civilians and their unending willingness to stand up against a military regime that disregards human life and human rights.

Interview | Kawkareik Township, Dooplaya District (March 2021)

[This interview takes place with two protesters living in Kawkareik Town: A--- (male, 31) and B--- (male, 27). The interview begins with A---.]

Where do you live?

I live in Kawkareik Town. We do not want the military coup or military rule. This is not just now. In the past we did not like it and we do not want it [now]. Therefore, everyone has been participating actively against it recently.

You do not like military rule.

No, I don't like it.

Why don't you like it?

We have not liked them [the Tatmadaw] since long ago, because we have already experienced the way they rule the country. As I remember, from 1994 to 1998, we could not even listen to

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 Burma/Myanmar government and agreed to transform into battalions within the Tatmadaw.

⁴ Tatmadaw is the term most commonly used in referring to Myanmar's armed forces. The term has been used by KHRG throughout its reporting history, and most consistently during periods of civilian government. Since the February 1st 2021 coup and the military's establishment of the State Administration Council (SAC) as the executive governing body of Myanmar, Myanmar's armed forces have also come to be referred to as the SAC military. KHRG uses the term SAC military in specific reference to the Myanmar military since the February 1st 2021 coup. During previous periods of military rule, KHRG also used the names adopted by the military government in referring to the Tatmadaw (i.e. SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) between 1988 to 1997, and SPDC (State Peace and Development Council) from 1998 to 2011), because these were the terms commonly used by villagers in KHRG research areas.

⁵ The Karen National Liberation Army is the armed wing of the Karen National Union.

⁶ [“With conflict escalating, Karen BGF gets back to business”](#), *Frontier Myanmar*, May 2021.

⁷ The 8888 Uprising was a series of student-led protests that took place in 1988 opposing the military rule of U Ne Win.

the radio inside our houses. According to studies, our country was a developed country in 1962. However, since the military seized power [in 1962], the country has become undeveloped. There was nothing left in the country. The education system and other [institutions] deteriorated. Therefore, we have not wanted military rule since long ago. We are against the military because we experienced it ourselves [in the past]. In 2021, we rise against the military but there are reasons why the situation in Kawkaik Town is more quiet [fewer protests than elsewhere in Myanmar]. One of the reasons is because we do not have backup [support] from others.

[...]

How about the situation now? Do people from Kawkaik Town join or hold protests against the military?

Some do, but only a few people are active. It doesn't mean that there are no people, it just means that there are few people. Currently, they are afraid to go out on the road. But I want to say that we do not need to be afraid. If we do not act against this now, if we cannot fight against them at this time, there will be no chance to fight against them later. This is the time for us to defeat them [by] fighting [against] them and taking to the streets [to protest].

So there are only a few people [joining the protests]?

We can say that we do not have many people. Actually, we have people but we do not have many [a lot of] people [who join the protest]. When we fight against the dictatorship during this time, one person cannot be active and stand alone to fight the dictatorship. The majority of the people should stand together. For example, now in the villages, if there are five people in one household, three of them go out on the street and protest. And yet, they are just casual workers and day labourers. But in Kawkaik Town, if there are five people [in a household], those five people just act as though nothing regards them or that it is not their problem. [...] I don't want them to be or stay like that. I would like them to fight against the military dictatorship. I think we are not going to starve if we do not work for just one or two months. The most important thing is to act against the military dictatorship. We need human power for that. However, people are in fear. The reason why they have concerns and fear is because there is no one to back them up [to stand behind them]. For example, in Hpa-an, there are some organisations or groups that will stand [up] for people who are participating and joining [protests] against the military dictatorship. However, there is no organisation in our town to stand with us. We have to solve whatever we face in our own way and suffer it by ourselves. Therefore, people think no one will stand with or for them when they have any problems or face anything. The lawyers are not standing with or for them. Therefore, people do not want to stand [up themselves] and go out on the street to protest and oppose [the military dictatorship].

Have you joined/participated in protests every day? Have you faced any threats or challenges?

There are risks for us. We went out when we could. We were active on the front line. We also faced threats. Some people [unclear who] even warned told us: *"If you dare, just go out [a way of stressing how dangerous it is]"*. However, we were not afraid and we just went out. After February 28th and March 1st 2021, we rarely went out because there were only a few people left who were eager to go out. We cannot [it is hard to] act alone when [other] people from our town are not active and eager to go out. That's the reason why people from Kawkaik Town are quiet and do not participate in the protest movement.

Those are the problems.

Yes, we have problems and those are the problems. People from town who join the protest feel unsafe because the police and Tatmadaw soldiers will arrest them at night.

What about the situation at the current time?

Yes, they [still] arrest people at night. They won't come [to your house] to arrest you in the daytime. However, they will just arrest you wherever or whenever they see you [out of the

house] in the daytime. Therefore, people feel unsafe whether it is day or night. People are just careful [stay alert] about whether they will get arrested during the daytime but they forget to stay alert during nighttime so they can [easily] get arrested at night. There are too many unsafe situations so they are afraid and dare not be active. They [SAC military and police force] are putting this fear in people since there are no people to stand with or for people from the town, and people are not united. [Everyone needs to be united.] For example, if the police or soldiers surround one house, the neighbours' houses cannot [should not] be quiet. When [one] house bangs the steel [bangs pots or pans as protest], the neighbours should also do the same thing. They cannot [should not] stay behind closed doors and switch off the lights.

Did anyone stop you or other civilians from protesting?

There were people [SAC soldiers and police] who stopped us in the beginning. Later they realised that they could not stop us so they didn't [try to] stop us anymore. However, the police and SAC soldiers are using violent means to stop the civilians from protesting. In the beginning, people [officials] from the [town] sections were putting pressure on the protestors [to stop protesting]. That was just in the beginning. Later they stopped putting pressure [on people]. However, there are people who give information or contact the police or soldiers [with information] about who is doing what and where. That kind of information.

People from other areas or towns in Myanmar are protesting against the military actively. How about people in Kawkaik Town? Are they afraid of the military [soldiers] or aren't they active?

In this situation, they are not active because they are afraid. Even if we do not like the military, we cannot stand alone against them. I already mentioned it. We should be united and stand together with the majority of the people. It will only be meaningful when we stand together united with one mind and one heart, and against the military dictatorship. There will be no difference [we will not be able to make a difference] if we stand and act alone.

There are people who do not like the military dictatorship but they dare not protest.

Yes, people do not like them but do not dare protest against them. They are not united as well.

In your opinion, do you think the majority of the people from Kawkaik Town like the military dictatorship?

Everyone dislikes the military dictatorship. However, they are afraid to hold protests. There are some people who are eager to protest against the military like in other towns. However, we cannot do it with only a few people. This is not something we can do with only five or 10 or even 20 people. We should [must] stand against them with a majority of the people. For example, in Myawaddy [Township] and Hpa-an [Township], people from the whole village go out for the protests. If they live in the sections [town divisions], people from the whole section participate in the protest. At least one person from each household must participate in the protest. That serves as a kind of encouragement or energetic example for us. However, even if we encourage people from Kawkaik Town, there are people who give information [to the police and soldiers] to arrest those who encourage the protestors or organise the protests. Therefore, no one dares to encourage or organise people openly. However, they [SAC security forces] try to arrest those who are active, energetic and participating in the protests. Those active people are not the leaders. Actually we do not have a leader. However, they arrest many active young people because they think they are the leaders. They target those active people and threaten them. Some people have been arrested and detained but their families do not get any information and do not know where they are and how they are doing.

How many people were arrested?

In the beginning, seven people were arrested. On February 28th 2021, which was the last day of protest by people from Kawkaik Town, 13 people were arrested. They had not started the protest yet, they were just about to start. But they were arrested.

Was it on [the day of] February 28th 2021 [that they were arrested]?

Yes. We do not know when they brought them to court or how the court process went. We also do not know where they sent those people. We were not able to get any information about those 13 people. We also learned later on that there were seven more people arrested. However, we are not sure if those seven have been detained in jail or in other places. We have not received any news or heard from any news agency.

Were people injured on February 28th 2021?

Yes. People were injured. There were people who were shot by rubber bullets and some exposed to tear gas. I was exposed to tear gas myself. They used almost 100 tear gas [canisters] and many rubber bullets on that day.

So the protestors were crushed down on that day [February 28th 2021].

Yes, they were crushed down. Since then [that day], the civilians are scared so they do not go out to protest. Yes, they are scared because they have not [previously] had this kind of experience. Those who have experienced this [in the past] know that this is just a threat. However, it is also difficult for those who have experienced this [in the past] because they have [lingering] trauma. We just have to be careful that they won't get more trauma. It will be difficult if the youth of today also get trauma [from torture and abuses]. We should figure out some way to sort this out.

Do you have any ideas [for sorting this out]? What do you hope for your country and peace?

We hope for everything. We do not want this military dictatorship for our future and in our lives. We are just like dead people since we were born. This is because of military rule. Our lives [spirit/soul] are dead, only our bodies are not dead. Our lives were coming to life slowly when the civilian government [National League for Democracy (NLD)] was ruling the country. The new generations are also starting their new lives. It is just the beginning for us to start growing. However, we cannot allow our lives, and moreover that of our new [younger] generations, to become dead because of this military. So this is the time for us to fight for it [our future]. Therefore, I would like to let Kawkaik Thu, Kawkaik Tha [people from Kawkaik Town] know that. Humans die, we all know that. However, people from Myanmar have died many times already. Therefore, we must not feel hesitation to die this time [for this cause]. If we are afraid to die this time [for this cause] and just do nothing about it [military dictatorship], our lives will be dead forever. Our daughters' and sons' children; our new generations' lives will be dead as well. We do not want that. We do not want their lives to be dead. Therefore, we will try to fight for it [their future] as much as we can. I want those who have not started doing anything yet, to start doing something. If we look back at the situation in the past in Kawkaik [Town] during the period of military rule, people who had that experience and used to be forced porters, their lives used to be dead. Therefore, if you are afraid of the forced porter era, you will have to stand and fight for the situation not to return to how it was. I would like to say that those who are afraid of the forced porter era, we have to fight against it. If the military gets power, the situation will automatically go back to the forced porter era even if we do not want it to come back. Even if we do not want to go back to that era or see the situation from that era, don't let our new generations have the experience from that era. Don't push them back to that era. Don't let that era come back. I would like civilians to stand against it and fight it. Under military rule, forced portering will be back even if we don't call or wish for it. Our new generations will be pushed into this forced porter era as well. We do not want them to be drawn into that and face the situation from that era. We do not want them to lead dead lives within living bodies. I would like to encourage everyone to participate and fight for it [our future].

Are there people who participate in the CDM [Civil Disobedience Movement]⁸?

⁸ On February 2nd 2021, healthcare workers at state-run hospitals and medical facilities across Myanmar spearheaded what is being referred to as a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) consisting of labour strikes in

Yes, there are those who participate in the CDM and there are also people who do not participate in the CDM. For example, there are staff who are not joining the CDM; such as the general administrator from Kawkaik Town, La Wa Ka staff [Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population staff], and staff from Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Irrigation.

How about the teachers and the doctors?

Most of the teachers and doctors participate in the CDM.

[Another interviewee, B---, interrupted and said:] [Staff from] the Ministry of Education w[ere] the first group that participated in the CDM. The second group was [staff from] the Ministry of Health and Sports. That is the majority of staff who participate in the CDM. However, there are just a few staff from other ministries participating as well. The general administrator from Kawkaik Town and other staff from some ministries are going back to work. They are telling others that they participate in the CDM, but it is just words. There are only a few staff who are doing the actual CDM. Our town is not like other towns and townships.

They submitted resignation letters but they still go to work.

[B--- continued speaking]. They just tell people that they participate in the CDM but they still go to work at their office. The majority of staff who are doing the CDM are from the education and healthcare departments. The reason that the majority of the staff are from education is because they really have a grievance. They worked really hard on Election Day on November 8th 2020 and they were really tired. Even if they worked really hard, later they were blamed [and told] that they cheated in counting the votes or ballots. The Tatmadaw Council accused them, which is why they are now participating in the CDM. The second group is the healthcare department. There are some doctors who are well known who have had to flee and hide. People have to be careful even in the daytime because they can be arrested anytime, whenever the SAC soldiers or police see them. Then they [SAC soldiers and police] also go around or to your house to arrest you. Not only Myanmar government staff, even the local villagers/civilians are not feeling safe. They have to hide at night. It is worse now than before because when you go out you do not even dare to take your phone with you. They check your phone and then they can charge you with any [legal] sanctions they want when they suspect you. They will keep your phone too. When the SAC soldiers and police arrest people, there is no evidence for them to prove that those people have committed something [a crime]. They would like to charge you with something [a crime], but when there is no evidence they might charge you with something else. For example, they might accuse you of other crimes such as drugs and so on. This is the situation that we are seeing right now.

Some people [business people] have problems so they do not go out for the protests. For instance, there are seven companies [lending agencies] that do loan business in Kawkaik Town. The taxes that the companies have to pay also go to the [SAC] government. Therefore, I think the companies should also participate in the CDM, but they do not. Therefore, it seems like they are supporting [the military] to buy the bullets to shoot us. During this time, it is difficult for the local villagers to get work. We also had difficult times during COVID-19 [first and second waves]; it just got better⁹ and then this military coup happened right away. Therefore, the local

protest against the February 1st 2021 military coup. The movement quickly spread to include civil servants from all sectors of the government who are walking off their jobs as a way of non-recognition and non-participation in the military regime. Because of the popularity of the movement, and its seminal role in wider protests across the country, some people have begun using it as a catch-all phrase to include other protest forms like boycotts and pot-banging.

⁹ It is unclear what the interviewee means about the situation getting better, since the COVID-19 pandemic was still progressing in Myanmar just prior to the military coup. Little testing has been undertaken and no data from the Ministry of Health and Sports on positive cases by location has been available since February 2021. Thus it is possible that this lack of new information about the COVID-19 situation may have led the interviewee to believe that the situation had gotten better at the time of the interview.

villagers have to face difficulties and do not have job opportunities or do not know how to solve their [livelihood] problems. The local villagers and civilians do not have any work to earn an income and do not own any business. But now [the loan companies] are forcibly collecting taxes from the local villagers and civilians [the loan companies are trying to collect interest and payments from people who borrowed money because the SAC is collecting taxes from these companies and putting pressure on them]. So the local people have to decide whether they are going to attend the protests, starve, or be abused by the [loan] companies. They have many doubts [are undecided/confused]. It's a pity that they [the loan companies] are forcibly collecting money from the civilians because civilians will have to work for their income and join the protests at the same time. I would like the companies to have sympathy for the civilians.

It is not safe for the protestors or civilians who join the protests from Kawkaeik Town. The police even issue warrants to arrest them [the protestors]. Most of the young protestors are girls and women. However, we have heard bad news about the young female protestors when they are arrested for participating in the protests. Some news is really hard to listen to when they are arrested [because women might face sexual abuses if they get arrested]. Therefore, they are fearful in their heart about joining the protests. For example, [they wonder if] they will be raped or what they [police] will do to them when they are arrested. They are afraid of that. This is the feeling of the civilians. Therefore, that is why we do not want the military because we do not feel safe. We do not want to live a life of insecurity. [A--- interjected: There is no rule of law under military rule]. They said they are doing these things according to the law, but they are just mouthing the words. We can see that they are people who do not follow the rules, for instance, regarding torture and abuse, or looting, taking someone else's belongings without asking permission [unlawful confiscation]. They arrest people at night without any warrant. They are committing and doing many unlawful things now. The civilians are not the ones who break the laws or rules. They [the military] are the ones who break the laws and rules themselves. The military council announced that they had to take over power because the situation of the country is not stable. But it is not that, the country is not stable because of the military coup. If they give the power back to the civilian government, there will be no reason for civilians to go out and protest.

So no one likes this current military government?

No one likes the military. Not just people of my age or youth [young adults], even children do not like them. They have their own future [to think about] and they do not want to live under the military. We see children from the rural areas protesting for that [their future]. We heard some children say that they will go back to school only after Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is released. Under military control in the past, the students had to study and follow what they [Myanmar military government] taught. The students did not get to think outside of the box and have their own ideas. They could not decide anything for themselves. The military also lowered the standard of education. The education standard from our country used to be high and ranked first; it was the same for business and sports. For example, in sports, Aung San Sport Stadium was the first sports stadium in Southeast Asia. Where is our standard now in Southeast Asia? We are now at the bottom. We are the richest country in Southeast Asia because of the natural resources. However, we are now at the bottom and a poor country. Just look at Singapore, it doesn't produce any natural resources but it's included in the Top-Ten countries [he is possibly referring to the Human Development Index, where the 2019 ranking for Singapore was 11, whereas Myanmar is 147]. We only got to live a better and more transparent situation for five years [under civilian rule], but the situation is now getting back to how it was in the past. We are feeling very heavy [worried] about the future of civilians.

[A--- adds:] Why don't we like the dictators? There are many reasons why we do not like them. Before 1962, the airports, the universities were the best. Thai people, Malaysians and Singaporeans had to come and attend the universities in our country. However, there is nothing left since the military seized power [in 1962]. The education standard has gotten lower slowly; including the living standard, and so on. [...] After the civilian government won the election, our

country gained more chances and opportunities to contact or connect with other countries. There is more transparency. We realised that our country is down at the bottom. This military coup and military rule have happened again just when we were trying to increase development in our country. Other countries have developed more than us and are many steps ahead. We have been stopped or made to fall when we were about to run. We cannot be quiet and stay still like that anymore. We will fight back against them. We do not want to go back to a situation where we do not have freedom like before. We have to be aware, understand and see everything nowadays. We have to try. We want a democratic country. We had to learn what they [the military] wanted us to, such as memorising whatever they wanted. We had to memorise this, read this and take that exam. We had to follow this and do that. However, we cannot help or answer anything nowadays when the students ask anything from us. We do not know any of those things because we did not get to learn or study them. We finished Grade 10 but we cannot read the vocabulary from a Grade 2 student book. We cannot use the correct pronunciation. We have to study again how to pronounce it. However, after Daw Aung San Suu Kyi [NLD] won the election and ruled the country, the education system/standard was getting higher and better. That's why I thought, the new generation should have this kind of government. We will develop our country. We do not want their [young people's] future to be destroyed as ours was. Our civilians from Kawkaireik Town should know this. Those who are afraid to join the protest should know this and more people should participate in the CDM. We want them to call for what they want and shout for what they need. Therefore, we want to encourage people from Kawkaireik Town to be united and fight against the military. We should be united against the military at this time. This is what I want to share.

What else do you want to add? [Question asked to B---, age 27, Kawkaireik Town]

I want to ask people from Kawkaireik Town to stand against the military and join the protest even if they are afraid. We should fight together for ourselves in the future and for our younger generations. We do not want to stop or prevent our younger generations from having a brighter future. Those who are participating in the protests, most of them are under 20 years old. There are fewer people who are aged 30 or 40. People who were killed [in the protests] are young people. They all are educated people; such as technicians, doctors and engineers. All the people who sacrificed their lives are educated and young people. Even with things happening at this time, we cannot say that this [the atrocities that the military is committing] won't happen again next time or become worse than during the 1988 movement [8888 Uprising]. If we don't fight it [military rule] this time, the situation will be worse than in 1988. We accept that we did not win the 1988 movement because we did not have knowledge [about politics] because there was no transparency [people could not learn what they want] and the financial situation was not good. However, even the day labourers or casual workers are joining the movement now. Even though they do not work for two months, they can endure livelihood difficulties. However, they must work and also protest. There are seven days in a week, so they will work for four days and protest three days. They are helping each other and standing together even though they are not rich and do not have much. Therefore, I would like to encourage everyone to participate and stand against the military. This is not the situation like in 1988. We should stand together, help each other and fight against the military together. I also would like to encourage those who are afraid, not to be afraid and to fight against the military, just protest against it bravely. We must defeat the military, we must win this movement.



This photo was taken on February 22nd 2021 in Kawkareik Town, Dooplaya District. Villagers from 23 village tracts in Dooplaya District held a protest demanding peace and justice. There were around 15,000 villagers of different ethnic and religious backgrounds participating in the protest. They all came down to T'Maing Kon village for a gathering and then marched toward Kawkareik Town. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This photo was taken on March 9th 2021 on the Asia Highway near Kawkareik Town, Aw Hpa Hpa Doh village tract, Kaw T'Ree Township, Dooplaya District. It shows some of the protective gear that protesters began using in order to shield themselves from SAC violence during the protests. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This photo was taken on March 9th 2021 on the Asia Highway near Kawkareik Town, Dooplaya District. It shows villagers protesting against the military regime. Over 9,000 villagers participated in the protest. SAC police and soldiers did not allow them to cross the highway and enter into town, so they had to remain on one side of the highway for their protest. *[Photo: KHRG]*



This photo was taken on March 9th 2021 on the Asia Highway near Kawkareik Town, Dooplaya District. It shows the demands villagers made in protesting against the military regime: 1. An end to dictatorship; 2. Democracy; 3. Release of those who were arrested unfairly; 4. Unity among ethnic groups; 5. Federal democratic union. *[Photo: KHRG]*

Interview | Win Yay Township, Dooplaya District (March 2021)

[Interview with C---, a 47-year-old Karen shopkeeper from D--- village, Kyone Khon village tract, Waw Ray (Win Yay) Township, Dooplaya District]

Regarding the protests that are happening, why are they happening?

In my opinion, because they [the military] do what they should not do. That is why people are protesting in the streets. They are not relatives [related to each other]; rather every person is going onto the street and protesting [by their own decision]. By looking at this, I see that they are protesting because they are dissatisfied with the injustice [that is taking place].

What are the other factors that caused these issues [the protests]?

The military seized power, but nine out of ten civilians are not in favour of it, thus, they are protesting against it. As a consequence of the protest, [more] conflict has occurred. The fact is that, since what the military is doing is not right, the people who are dissatisfied with this have started to protest. If the things that they do were right, everybody would keep quiet. But people are now protesting because what they [the military] do is not right.

How many villages have joined the protest?

There are many villages that join the protest. In the area near where I live, the villages include: E---, F---, G---, H---, I---, J---, D---, K---. On the other side of K--- [village], the villages [joining the protests] include: L---, M---, N---, O--- all the way to P---. People from these villages are

protesting in their area, and if it is necessary, they go to Kyainseikgyi [Town] to protest. However, if it is not necessary, they just protest in their area. People are protesting peacefully in their own territory without any hostility [violence].

Which day did they start to protest?

In this area, we began to protest officially on February 9th 2021. However, in other areas, the protests already began a few days ago. Since the day that we started to protest, we go to protest every two days. We gathered to protest peacefully in the places where it is necessary [it is unclear what places the interviewee is referring to].

Regarding this situation [the protests], are there any obstacles that held you back in doing the protest?

If I speak honestly, some youth who are eager to go [protest] were forbidden by their parents, because they believe that this issue [the coup] is only relevant to the leaders and has nothing to do with them [civilians]. Nevertheless, when they [the parents] said that this problem is only relevant to the leaders and it has nothing to do with us [civilians], their children left their homes to join the protest anyway. When they go out, the parents are unable to prohibit them from going to certain places. But the young generations of 2021 join the protest because they have the attitude that it is really necessary for them to participate. The youth do not go to protest because their parents urge them to go, but because of their generation-Z mindset and courage.

I heard that the Chyaung Nit Khwa bridge is closed. On which day was the bridge closed?

There were no problems when we went to protest on the other days. We asked for approval before we would go from one area to another to protest. Since this area is Karen National Union (KNU)¹⁰-controlled area, there is no problem to demonstrate here. But if we go to other areas, we have to ask before we go, to see whether it will be okay to go for a demonstration there or not, since those areas are controlled by other armed groups. We had no problem when we went to protests every week beforehand. However, we encountered a big problem when we went to protest on February 28th 2021. We were blocked at Chyaung Nit Khwa Bridge. Around 9:00 am when we went, a couple of our cars carrying protesters had already passed the bridge. Meanwhile, we were cut off from the cars that were already on the other side -- they [the military] blocked the way immediately. The cars that had already reached the Kyainseikgyi area were able to start protesting there. However, since they [the military] would not allow us to cross the bridge, we faced many problems. The protestors [in the cars that were in front of us] phoned us and told us that they could not move forward. When I asked the reason why they could not move forward, they said that the bridge was closed. At first, I thought that this could not be true, because Kyainseikgyi Township is not influenced [controlled] by the Myanmar military but by Karen people and Karen military. Because this area is not under military control, I never thought that the command of the Myanmar military would have influence here, thus, we went there without any concern. Regarding the problem that we faced on February 28th 2021, I am really sad and I never thought as well that this might happen. When I heard that the bridge was closed, the thought came to my mind that the authority of the Myanmar military must have already reached this area. Therefore, I told them [the protesters in the cars in front of us] not to turn back, but to stop there and demonstrate at that place. When I asked about the number of protestors at that place, they said that only 60 people had arrived there for the moment. Thus, I told them not to turn back [just] because their number is small, but to wait there because more cars were coming on the way. Moreover, I told them that we should increase our number and we have to stay until we finished what we have started and until the bridge is reopened. When I arrived there, I saw that a line was drawn (to stop the protestors from crossing). The protestors

¹⁰ 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.

who already arrived there were already demonstrating. When I arrived there, I started to demonstrate as well. At that time, the situation between both sides was getting more tense because the number [of protesters] was increasing. People might have also been thinking, “*We will cross the bridge whether it is closed or not*” because they had never experienced this kind of authority. Since we had never lived in places like Yangon or Mandalay where there is a lot of Myanmar military, we had never thought about these kinds of restrictions being placed on us. So when I found that the military’s authority had arrived here, I became furious, and was aching to break these restrictions. At that time, U¹¹ Soe Paing (known as well as U Taing Gi) from the KNU and his fellow KNU officials approached the police [Myanmar Police Force (MPF)] to ask for permission.

What is the position of U Soe Paing?

U Soe Paing is one of the authorities from the KNU. For example, here, there is something [an arrangement] like one person is in charge of road number one, and another person is in charge of road number two. And U Soe Paing is in charge of this road [to Kyainseikgyi].

When he went to ask for permission, how many soldiers were there [with him]?

You mean his colleagues? There were two colleagues beside him. He [U Soe Paing] was not wearing any uniform, just ordinary [civilian] clothes, and was not holding any weapons either. His two colleagues were also wearing ordinary clothes. But they came carrying guns over their shoulder just in case, because [they knew that] there was a problem at that place [at the bridge]. While he [U Soe Paing] was talking [with the MPF], a moment later, three people in uniform [affiliation not reported in the interview, but most likely KNLA] arrived with guns in front of the line that had been drawn [to block protesters]. U Soe Paing and those three people went inside. Since they were talking at a distance from us, we didn’t hear any of what they said. After they talked, he [U Soe Paing] came back among the protestors. Then he went back and talked again. When he came back again, we asked him whether we could cross the bridge or not. He said that [we] could not. When we asked him why we could not, he said that although these police officers were blocking the bridge, the one who ordered the blocking of the bridge was our own people. When we asked who it was that ordered this, he said that U Mahn Win Yone, who is an officer from regiment Htee Hu Than (#1021) ordered the blocking of the bridge. When he said that, all of the protestors were astonished because we thought that the authorities from the Myanmar military made the order to block the bridge. But when we heard that someone from our area, not from the [SAC] military, ordered the blocking of the bridge, we became really sad.

Is he from the Border Guard Force (BGF)?

Yes. We were really sad because someone from BGF ordered this. We were really sad and unsatisfied [disappointed] because someone from our ethnic group, someone whom we had seen before, someone who is from our territory commanded this.¹² I will say honestly that I am not satisfied.

So the police blocked the road because the BGF ordered it?

Yes.

Are the police under his authority?

On the other side of the bridge, around three or four BGF soldiers were standing guard. Just beside them, a group of police [presumably MPF] were also standing guard. That is the situation for the bridge that goes to Kyainseikgyi. On the road that goes to Mudon, there are two [MPF] police outposts. [That day], there were two police officers at the outpost near the line [drawn to block the protesters], three police officers at a distance, and around seven police officers with

¹¹ U is a Burmese title used for elder men, used before their name.

¹² Given that the BGF are affiliated with the Tatmadaw, the surprise and disappointment expressed by the interviewee seems to be more clearly tied to the fact that BGF are ethnically Karen, and that they should not be taking action against Karen civilians.

phones, who were reporting the situation at a distance a little further away. And there were around two reporters there as well.

How many people from the KNU came to resolve the problem?

There were only three people who talked with the police in front of many people. I mean that those three people are the colleagues of U Soe Paing. If we include U Soe Paing, there were four people altogether. There were three people wearing military uniforms [most likely KNLA] and bearing weapons as well, who remained on this side of the line. We only saw them.

How many of them altogether?

There were only seven people, including U Soe Paing, altogether. [The numbers are unclear. There may have been two other colleagues in civilian clothes, mentioned earlier, who did not join in the discussion with the police.]

What was the number of protestors after they gathered there altogether?

While those people who had already arrived there said that their number was around 60, we arrived with around 10 more cars. If we include the cars that came behind us, the number would be around 500 people.

Until what time did you protest there?

Just half an hour after we arrived, U Soe Paing and his colleagues arrived as well. He said that he could not solve the problem because U Mahn Win Yone ordered the blocking of the bridge. After he said that, we continued to demonstrate around one hour. When the people who came after us said that they were going to solve the problem, we continued to demonstrate there because it gave us hope. After that, another group of people informed us that they [the people who were going to solve the problem] should solve the problem amongst themselves first and then arrange for us [to come] tomorrow because our people will get harmed if some kind of disastrous situation arises. Therefore, we all went back home and demonstrated just in our own area that whole day.

What time did you arrive [at the bridge]?

We discussed that we would gather there [presumably in Kyainseikgyi, where they originally planned to protest] at 9:00 am. We started to leave [our villages] at 8:00 am, so that we could reach at 9:00 am. However, some people arrived there at 9:00 am and some arrived there at 9:30 am [in this case the interviewee must be talking about the arrival at the bridge].

What slogans were chanted at the demonstration?

The main slogans that we chanted included the reasons to give back power [to the NLD], that they [the SAC] seized power unlawfully, and to free the leaders of the country that they [the SAC] arrested. [The slogans also expressed the idea that] we don't want this kind of situation happening for future generations. So we called to return the future of the youth back into the hands of the youth. Most people who joined the protest are young people. These young people joined the protest actively to fight for their future. They are not fighting for the future of the old people, but to get back the future of the youth [so that their future is in their own hands]. The other demand was to ensure a federal democracy for our ethnic minorities. These are the main points that we called for. One more thing was to show that we absolutely don't want military dictatorship. These five points are the main slogans that we chanted. The other slogans were just jokes for fun. Other main slogans included: *Let's protest! Let's protest!; To gain democracy! Our cause! Our cause!; Demonstrate our desire!; Give back the rights of the youth!; Free the country's leaders who were arrested!; and Who is our president? U Win Myint! U Win Myint!* (to demonstrate that the current person in power is not our president). Just by listening to the slogan "*Who is our President?*", the answer is sufficient [should speak for itself]. The other slogan was about building a federal union for all ethnic minorities.

Who arranged the food for you when you went there?

The civilians helped each other. When we were going to the demonstration, we didn't let any other cars drive on the road. After the roads were blocked (cars could not circulate), around 20 people from further down the road came to our cars to bring juice and water for us. This is the kind of thing that we did for that situation. Since we did not want any harm to come to any of our civilians [people], we decided to return to Q--- village, T'Gone Tine village tract to gather and demonstrate there. Some people offered us boxed meals, and some people offered us *Mote Let Saung* [a Burmese dessert]. The civilians offered it amongst themselves. After we ate, we continued on to E---. We finished around 3:00 or 4:00 pm. We were really tired yesterday [the day of the demonstration]. If we had been able to demonstrate in Kyainseikgyi, we could have come back early and we would not have gotten so tired. But now, since we had to come back to our area to demonstrate around the villages under the hot sun, many people got tired yesterday. When we look at their faces, only their forehead – where they had tied a bandana saying “Spring Revolution” – stayed fair [untouched by the sun], but their whole face turned dark because they had to demonstrate at around 11:00 am or 12:00 pm, which is the hottest time of the day. They just stood under the hot sun to demonstrate.

In order that this kind of situation [blocking of the bridge] not happen again, what would you like to say to the authorities here?

I left my work at home to join the demonstration not because I enjoy going to protest. So, rather than block the road again, they should do other things [get rid of the military dictatorship] to prevent these kinds of demonstrations from happening again. Because they blocked the bridge, if we tried to cross it, they would shoot us, since they have permission to shoot. But only we the civilians will get harmed. What we don't need is the people who carry guns and block us at the road. If they are not here anymore [if the military is no longer in power], if there is no authority [of the military], we will not need to go out of our home; we will just stay at home. What I want to say is that, we did not go to protest because they [the soldiers] blocked our way. They blocked our way, but they don't think about why people were going out from their home into the streets [in the first place]. There is only one solution to stop the people from leaving their homes [to protest]. If there is no military dictatorship, no one will go out from their homes even if they were forced to go out. People are going out into the street because they hate the military dictatorship. If they announce officially throughout the country that there is no military dictatorship in our country anymore, no one will go out of the house to demonstrate under the hot sun anymore even if they are tempted by being given tens of thousands of kyats [even if they are offered lots of money] to go out and demonstrate.

Regarding the problems that you face, what would you like to tell the authorities?

If I speak honestly, many people who should not have been killed have had to sacrifice their lives. Even though this protest is peaceful compared with the 8888 Uprising, many people have sacrificed their lives, and these people also have families. We don't want the military to seize power. If there is no military seizing power, every civilian could stay peaceful again. The situation will get peaceful only if the military turns back and forgoes [taking power]. The more they move forward, the more the civilians will also move forward. [If that continues,] we could face World War 3. In Myanmar, the situation is becoming disastrous, and ethnic groups are killing each other, [fighting] against their own ethnic groups [she may be referring to other Karen-led armed groups like Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA)¹³ and BGF]), as well as fighting each other [other ethnic groups]. Therefore, our country will end in devastation, and no one will be able to stop it. In my view, there would not be this kind of situation if there was no military dictatorship, thus, I demand for military dictatorship to be withdrawn.

What will you do until they withdraw the military dictatorship? Will you continue to have demonstrations?

¹³ In 1994, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) split from the KNLA over religious considerations. In 2010, the majority of DKBA troops transformed into BGFs, but one faction refused and changed its name to Democratic Karen Benevolent Army in 2012. The DKBA signed the NCA on October 15th 2015.

Honestly, the civilians are becoming weak [weary]. Think about this. Could you stand under the hot sun for one hour? Could you walk under the hot sun for two hours? No one provides support to these civilians but they do the demonstrations because they really want justice. These civilians who do the demonstrations also have to work for their own livelihood. Despite all of this, they have left their jobs and go to demonstrate. The military will be able to continue what they are doing [maintain power] since they have weapons, but civilians are not scared anymore, thus they continue to have demonstrations. But some people have to struggle for their livelihood; therefore, if the demonstrations are held for three days, they only go for two days. The people are getting weaker, thus, I am really sad about that. And when we become weak, it is an advantage for them [the military]. It is their strong point that they have weapons. However, the civilians are not keeping still; they also try as much as they can.

In some cases, the authorities lead [organise] the demonstrations. In these cases, do they have to hide at night because they are scared?

Yes, this is the case. Even in our area, which is controlled by the KNU, there are people who arrest their own people under articles 505 and 124 of the Penal Code,¹⁴ without the knowledge of the KNU. In this KNU-controlled area, from E--- to R--- village which they [KNU] consider their territory, they [SAC security forces] arrested around four or five people who incited the protests. We don't always see those people who are arrested in their home. We see them for a while, and at night, they have to flee and sleep in the woods.

These are all the questions that I have. But do you have anything more to say?

What I want to say is that we are not having demonstrations because we have a lot of free time and money, but [because we fight] for justice. This is neither our family issue, nor our siblings' issues, but the country's issue [a matter that concerns the whole country/population]. We go to demonstrate because we should go as civilians [citizens], since this is the country's issue. No one is going to be against whoever becomes [is elected] the president in our country, or our territory. But all the civilians are protesting because our country is ruled by military dictatorship. If there is no military dictatorship, no one is going to have demonstrations.

Do you have any experience with the 8888 Uprising?

I was only around 12 or 13 years old in 1988.

What kind of difficulties did you face at that time?

At that time, I lived in Yangon, Insein Street. I was selling things there. While I was selling, I saw a group of people demonstrating there. But when the police came with batons in their hands, those demonstrators broke up by themselves [scattered] and went inside different wards. At that moment, a lot of [Toyota] Dyna cars [small trucks] were also passing through there, with dead people as well as dying people on the roof [back of the truck], to go to San Chaung where the crematorium is located to cremate these people.

So those people were not dead yet?

Some people were not even dead.

So they beat them to death and put them onto the trucks?

Some people were dying and soaked with blood because they got wounded by gunfire. However, they were also put onto the truck. The dying people included both men and women.

¹⁴ A variety of amendments were made to the Penal Code (Sections 124D and 505(a)) to expand the definition of offenses against the state, making it easier to prosecute anyone participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement as well as anyone encouraging or supporting the movement. It inserted a new provision (505A) into the Penal Code regarding the spreading of "false news" that could be used to punish comments regarding the illegitimacy of the coup or the military government, and made additional amendments (to Sections 124A and 124C) prohibiting contempt toward the Myanmar military, as well as sabotage or obstruction of security forces "engaged in preserving the stability of the state".

Around two police officers were on the truck also. While the truck was going, the sarongs of the people were also floating [in the wind]. I saw it with my own eyes. I also saw the blood. Some dying people were still moving. At that time, my grandmothers lived in San Chaung, Han Tha Waddy roundabout, near the School for the Blind and the train station. I asked them about the situation. In some cases, some dying people were also cremated. However, some cremators took pity on the students who were dying, and so they hid some of them and brought them back into the wards and cured them. These are the experiences that I had myself in 1988, when I was just around 13 years old. In 1988, I saw things such as beheadings with my own eyes.

Did you experience fleeing at that time?

Since I was just a kid at that time, when all those disastrous things occurred around me, I was scared a little bit, but I did not have to flee anywhere. At that time, I also saw things like factories [being] broken into. But now people are not protesting that way. They are protesting in accordance with the rules [peacefully]. They protest this way because all of them want peace. There is no way to disagree with these protests. During the 1988 Uprising, blood was shed [and flowed] down the streets. In Insein Street, as well as other streets, we saw the blood of the students.

I don't have any more questions to ask. I would like to use the information that I asked of you. Do you agree for that?

Yes, I agree. You can use this information in any way, if you are going to use it for justice. If the information is for the civilians, you can use it anywhere you want to use it.

Further background reading on the protest movements in Southeast Myanmar since the February 1st 2021 coup can be found in the following KHRG reports:

- ["Military Atrocities and Civilian Resilience: Testimonies of injustice, insecurity and violence in Southeast Myanmar during the 2021 coup"](#), November 2021.
- ["Southeast Myanmar Field Report: Military coup, protests, armed conflict and attacks, human rights abuses, and COVID-19, January to June 2021"](#), December 2021.

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.

GNU-defined Karen State and Myanmar government-defined State and Region boundaries

