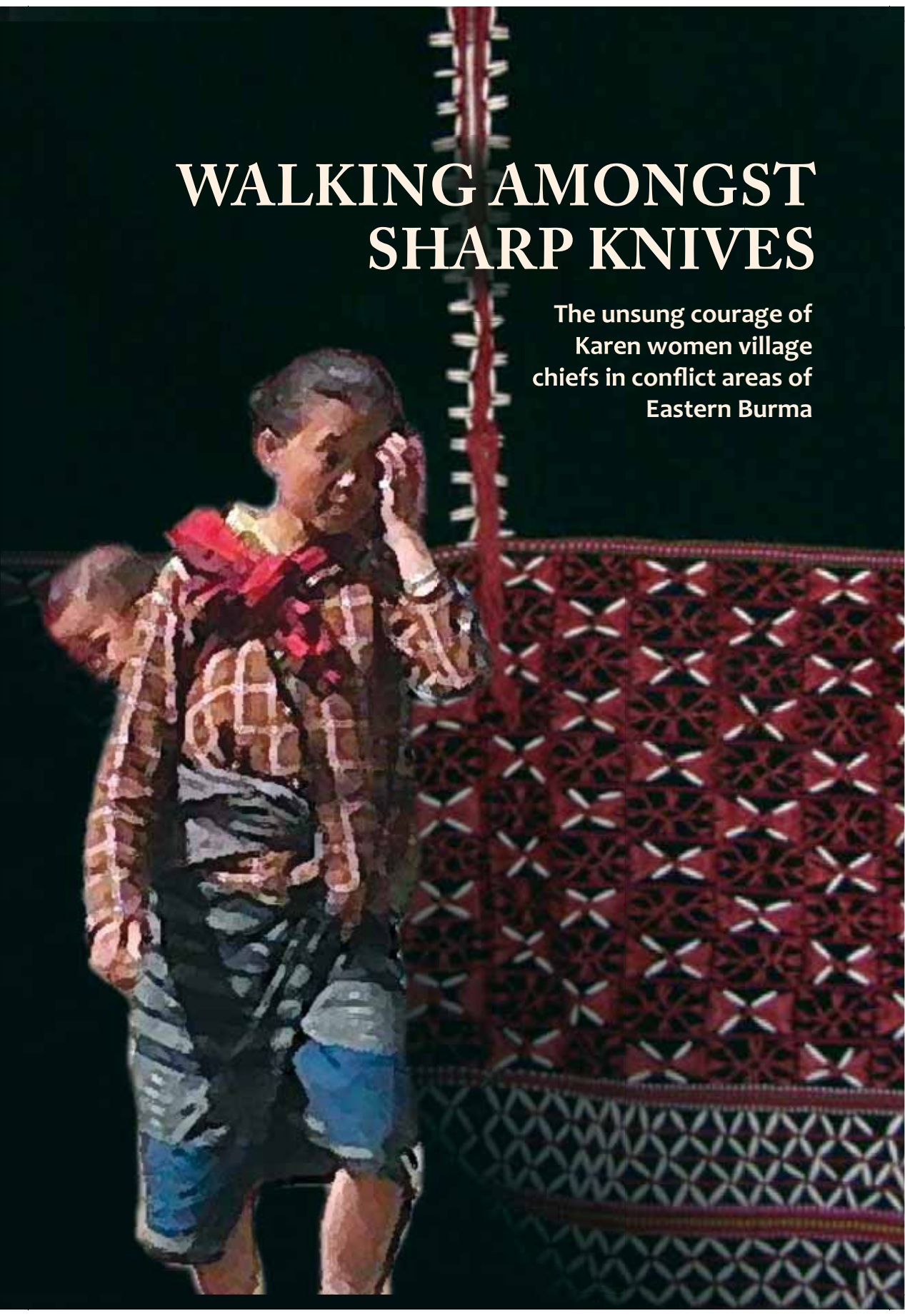


# WALKING AMONGST SHARP KNIVES

The unsung courage of  
Karen women village  
chiefs in conflict areas of  
Eastern Burma



### *Cover photo*

The background of the front cover is a Karen woman's shirt decorated with seeds that represent Karen culture.

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## **ACRONYMS**

KNU	Karen National Union
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council (Burma's military regime)
DKBA	Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
KWO	Karen Women Organization
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In lowland Karen areas in Eastern Burma women are increasingly taking on the role of village chief, as male village chiefs are more likely to be killed by the Burma Army.

This change, overturning deeply engrained tradition, has put women further into the front line of human rights abuses being committed by the Burma Army and their allies.

This report by the Karen Women Organization, based on the testimonies of 95 women chiefs, exposes for the first time the impacts of this dramatic cultural shift.

The abuses experienced or witnessed by the women chiefs include:

- Crucifixion
- People burnt alive
- Rape, including gang rape
- Many forms of torture, including beatings and “water torture”
- People buried up to their heads in earth and beaten to death
- Arbitrary executions
- Beheadings
- Slave labour

Many of the abuses described in this report would appear to be in breach of international law, including five articles of the Rome Statute, of the International Criminal Court.

The practice of electing women as village chiefs has spread through lowland Karen areas of Eastern Burma since the 1980s, as Burma’s military regime has expanded control and increased persecution of these war-torn communities. With men increasingly reluctant to risk their lives as chiefs, women have stepped in to assume leadership in the hope of mitigating abuses. However, testimonies of women chiefs show that, far from being exempt from the brutality of the Burma Army, they have faced ongoing systematic abuse, including gender-based violence.

This report is based on interviews with women chiefs from five districts of Eastern Burma: Papun (Mutraw), Dooplaya, Thaton (Doo Tha Htu), Nyaunglebin (Kler Lwee Htu), and Pa-an. They are aged from 25 to 82. The average length of time they served as chiefs was nine years; about one third of the women are still serving as chiefs.

The women chiefs not only describe their daily struggle to fulfill the constant demands of the Burma Army for labour, food, building materials, “taxes” and intelligence, but also testify to their systematic use of terror tactics to subjugate villagers and prevent them from cooperating with the Karen resistance.

Apart from bearing witness to numerous instances of abuse and murder of fellow-villagers, the chiefs themselves have suffered brutal punishment for alleged non-cooperation. One third of the women interviewed had been physically beaten or tortured.

The women also testify to ongoing impunity for sexual violence. They describe incidents of gang-rape, rape of girl-children and rape-murder for which they were unable to seek redress. They also describe being forced to provide “comfort women” for the Burma Army troops.

The women chiefs’ own vulnerability to gender-based violence has been deliberately exploited by the Burma Army as a means of intimidation. Rape of women chiefs was described as common, and several chiefs described being gang-raped. Pregnant and nursing women chiefs were also subjected to forced labour and grueling interrogation.

Despite the constant threat of violence, the women’s stories reveal their extraordinary strength and courage in assuming leadership and seeking to protect the rights of their communities. They have repeatedly dared to challenge and complain to Burma Army troops about abuses and in some cases managed to secure compensation and even rescinding of unjust orders.

The women chiefs have also suffered great personal stress from being unable to fulfill their traditional household roles and care for their families. Several were blamed by their husbands for being “married to the SPDC” because they had to follow their orders.

This report provides poignant insight into the challenges of women assuming leadership in a patriarchal and militarized society. The KWO hopes that this report will help bring recognition of these brave women for their sacrifices not only at the front line of abuses by Burma's military dictatorship, but at the forefront of the struggle for gender equality in Burma.

As militarization of Karen areas continues, with ongoing military offensives by the Burma Army and their allies deliberately targeting civilians, as well as ongoing abuses in areas under the control of the Burma Army, the KWO is urgently calling for the following measures:

- That the United Nations Security Council establish a Commission of Inquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity being committed by the Burmese military dictatorship.
- That the Royal Thai Government grants continued protection to those refugees who have fled military attacks and human rights abuses.
- That the Royal Thai Government suspends investment in projects such as dams and infrastructure which is fuelling militarization and abuses, and increasing refugee flows into Thailand.

A full list of recommendations is at the end of this report.

# BACKGROUND

## About Burma

Since Burma gained independence from Britain on 4th January 1948 ethnic people have faced repression from successive central governments. There are 8 main ethnic groups in Burma, and many other minority groups. Failure to grant rights and protection to ethnic people, followed by repression, communal violence and military aggression, led to many ethnic groups taking up arms to defend themselves, or to fight for an independent state. These conflicts have dominated Burma ever since.

Since 1962 Burma has been ruled by dictatorships. The current military dictatorship took power in a coup on 18th September 1988, following a popular uprising which successfully overthrew the previous regime.

Elections were held in 1990, in which the National League for Democracy, led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, won 82 percent of seats in Parliament. Burma's military refused to accept the result. Since then the dictatorship has fiercely suppressed all opposition, arresting, torturing and imprisoning democracy activists, and launching large scale military offensives against ethnic people which have resulted in millions of internally displaced people and refugees. It is estimated that more than ten percent of Burma's population has been forced to flee the country. Ethnic people living under military rule face a policy of Burmanisation, where new generations are banned from learning their history, culture and language.

In 2010 the generals will hold so-called elections which bring in a new constitution that is designed to maintain military rule through a civilian façade Parliament. General Ne Win introduced a similar structure in 1974 to maintain his rule. The new constitution grants no rights or protection to ethnic people, and will not bring reform or democratization.

## About the Karen

The Karen are one of the largest ethnic groups in Burma, with a population estimated to be around 7 million. Most Karen live in the Irrawaddy Delta, and in Karen State in Eastern Burma. Karen people have long faced severe repression in Burma. Under Burmese kings Karen people faced discrimination and repression, and were often used as slave labour.

Karen people were granted more rights under British colonial rule. When Britain began the process of returning independence to Burma, Karen leaders asked for a separate state where they would not face oppression. The Karen had sided with the British in World War Two and had been told by local officials and commanders that they would be granted a state. However, this promise was broken and the Karen were left in Burma. Peaceful Karen political campaigns for an independent state were ignored, and the Karen faced increased attacks and communal violence. The attacks escalated and political leaders were arrested, and in January 1949 the Karen National Union took up arms to defend the Karen people.

Despite repeated attempts by the Karen National Union to enter into ceasefire and reach a political solution, Burma's dictatorship continues to launch military offensives against the Karen people. The United Nations has described these offensives as deliberately targeting civilians, and therefore breaching the Geneva Conventions.

In Karen State and neighboring Shan and Karenni states, more than 3,500 villages have been destroyed in the past 15 years, more than in Darfur, Sudan. There are more than half a million internally displaced people, many of whom the dictatorship blocks from receiving humanitarian assistance.

## About the Karen Women Organization

The Karen Women Organization was formed in 1949 and has a membership of over 49,000 women.

In 2006 Naw Zipporah Sein, then General Secretary of the Karen Women Organization, was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with KWO.

KWO is a community-based organization of Karen women working in development and relief in the refugee camps on the Thai border and with IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) and women inside Burma. Since our formation in 1949 we have expanded our focus from one of purely social welfare to try to encourage an awareness of women's rights and to promote women's participation in community decision making and political processes.

The objectives of the KWO

- To assist women in the endeavour to be free from all forms of oppression.
- To promote and empower women in all spheres of life, including education and general living standards.
- To encourage women to participate in the struggle for freedom, democracy and equality.
- To develop women's knowledge, ability and skills, including political and organizational skills.
- To achieve the rights of women and equal status with men.
- To promote and maintain Karen culture and traditions.
- To care for the wellbeing of girls and children.

KWO aims to empower women through offering various capacity building trainings to teach skills, build confidence and create new opportunities so that women will be better able to solve problems. We are working hard to educate ourselves and our communities so that we can work more effectively and advocate for our struggle on the international stage.

We believe that women's contribution is an essential factor in the peace-building and national reconciliation processes of Burma.

In 2004, the Karen Women Organization published “Shattering Silences”, a report which documented 125 cases of the systematized rape and sexual abuse of women in Karen State. The crimes were committed by the Burmese military regime, known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), over a period of twenty years.

It was followed by a second report, “State of Terror” in 2007, which documented over 4,000 cases of different human rights violation including forced labour, forced relocation, forced porters, torture, murder, rape, physical abuse and sexual abuse, all perpetrated by the Burma Army.

This third volume of evidence “Walking Amongst Sharp Knives” builds on the two previous reports. It focuses on the unseen women’s leadership role in the armed conflict area and the persecution suffered by Karen women village chiefs. Nearly 100 cases of the persecution of women village chiefs from 1982 until 2009 were documented by the KWO.



*A displaced village in Karen State*

## Female spiritual village leaders – historical precedent for women village chiefs

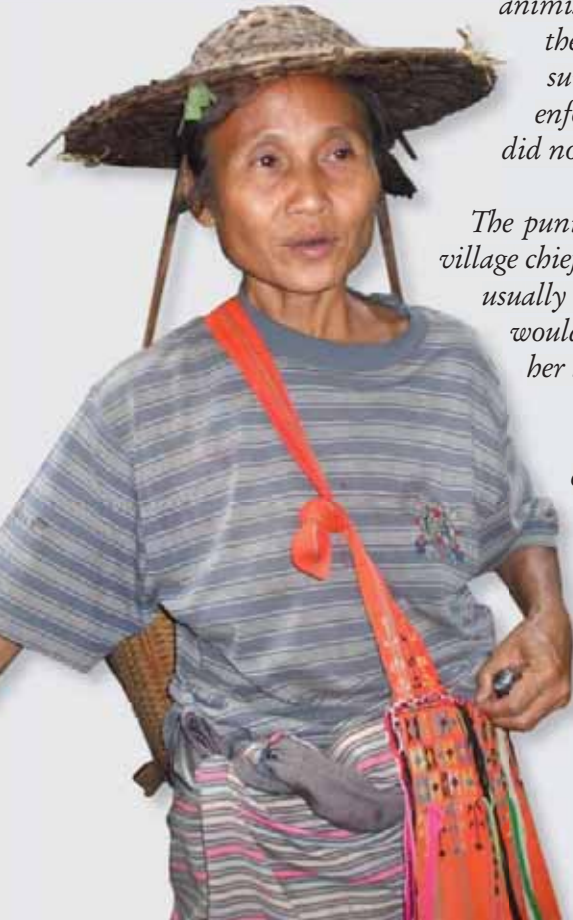
Although it is customary for Karen villages to elect men as village leaders, formerly either women or men were appointed as traditional Kaw K'sa (literally meaning “Lords of the Land”). They were repositories of local knowledge and arbitrated in matters of justice.

A Karen elder from Moulmein recounted his memory of local Kaw K'sa Mu (a female Kaw K'sa) in the late 1930s:

*“I remember there were women Kaw K'sa Mu in the traditional animist Karen villages, mainly in the hills, not in the Christian or Buddhist villages. They made sure that local rules and traditions were enforced. The rules were very strict. If people did not follow the rules they would be punished.*

*The punishments were not meted out by the (male) village chief, but by the Kaw K'sa Mu. The position was usually passed on through family members. They would select a suitable successor and then train her to take over when they died.*

*The Kaw K'sa Mu would know the history of their village and their tribe. They would know the demarcation of land belonging to the village – which houses, which forests, which mountains, and which rivers belonged to their people.”*



## Women as village chiefs

Villages in rural Karen areas are traditionally administered by village chiefs. The chiefs are elected by consensus during village meetings, and usually serve terms of at least one year, often much longer. Each chief is assisted by a village secretary, who is similarly elected.

The main responsibility of the village chiefs, apart from arbitrating on community issues, is to be the contact point for outside authorities requiring taxes, supplies or services from the villagers. Depending on the location of the village, the authorities may comprise officials and troops of the ruling regime, ceasefire troops or resistance troops. Often, the chiefs have to deal with several authorities.

Over 30 years ago, it was highly unusual for rural Karen women to be elected as village chiefs. According to traditional gender roles, Karen women were mainly expected to remain at home, looking after children and performing household and farming tasks. Only rarely, when women were regarded as particularly capable, were they chosen to be chiefs.

It was in the early 1980s, when the military regime stepped up operations against the Karen resistance and expanded their military infrastructure further into lowland rural areas of Eastern Burma, that the tradition began to change. As Burma Army persecution of male village chiefs became more intense, fewer men were willing to risk their lives in this position, and women were increasingly asked to be chiefs.

After the fall of the Karen Headquarters in 1995 and subsequent loss of large areas of Karen territory, the Burma Army presence spread further into lowland areas closer to the Thai border, and more villages in these areas began appointing women village chiefs.

Today women chiefs have become commonplace in these lowland rural Karen areas. In the mountainous border regions, where the regime has been employing a scorched earth policy to flush out the Karen resistance, the practice is less common. In these “free-fire” zones, villagers flee advancing Burma Army patrols. Village chiefs avoid formal contact with the Burma Army so it has been less necessary to appoint women to this position.

# Original location of women village chiefs interviewed for this report



# ANALYSIS OF STORIES

## Reflecting the shifting political landscape

The women's stories, which span several decades, show a direct correlation between the appointment of women village chiefs and the expansion of Burma Army control of rural Karen areas. The setting up of new Burma Army bases invariably led to increased persecution of nearby villages, with male village chiefs being accused of having links with the Karen resistance, and being tortured and killed. With men no longer daring to be chiefs, women were called upon to assume this role instead.

Most of the earlier stories from the 1980s are from Thaton district, as the Burma Army stepped up military operations from the west into Karen areas. In the early 90s, more women started becoming chiefs in the Pa-an and Dooplaya areas, as the Burma Army began advancing closer to the Karen territories along the Thai border.

Following the fall of the Karen headquarters of Manerplaw in 1995, and the subsequent loss of territory along the Thai border to the SPDC and the newly formed pro-SPDC Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), there was a noticeable increase of women chiefs in the Dooplaya area. Since 1995, the women's stories begin to describe the difficulties of surviving not only the demands and abuses of the SPDC but also the DKBA.

## Witness to systematic abuse

*“Some of the villagers were arrested whilst working on their farms, they were tied up, crucified and finally, had their throats cut.” (Interview 50)*

The testimonies of the women chiefs show a consistent pattern to the Burma Army's treatment of local communities. Not only do their troops constantly demand labour, food, building materials, “taxes” and intelligence, but they are clearly authorized to use terror tactics to subjugate villagers to prevent them from cooperating with the Karen resistance.

The women chiefs give numerous accounts of villagers being beaten, tortured and killed on suspicion of supporting the Karen troops.

## ***Buried alive***

*“A problem that I faced with the SPDC as the village chief was when they arrested my villagers and asked them to dig a hole. Then they put the villagers in the hole and covered them with earth. They covered them with earth but they left the villagers' heads and stomped on them on the ground. Then they took out the villagers and beat them and brutally tortured villagers for a month and after that they killed them.”*  
(Interview 72)

## ***Water torture***

*“An officer of Brigade #66 from the SPDC used to threaten me by saying that “every village chief has to ‘drink water’ (water torture) and you have not done this, so be careful.””* (Interview 9)

*“Two villagers were working on their farm. It was in April 2002. One was 28 and one was 12 years old. Where they were working their farm, the SPDC were ambushed by Karen soldiers. The SPDC said that these women informed the Karen soldiers. Actually they did not know anything about it at all. The Commanding Officer Pay Myo Aung from #1 Battalion, Infantry Battalion Column #4 arrested and tortured them. When the women said they did not know anything, Pay Myo Aung covered their faces with plastic and forced their heads into the water and repeated this many times.”* (Interview 87)

*“If they see any villagers on the way, they would ask them to show them where the Karen soldiers are and ask them to find weapons. If the villagers could not find any weapons, they would be tortured. The SPDC would torture the villagers by setting them alight with fire, pouring water into their nose, and throwing stones at their chest.”* (Interview 51)

## ***Beheading***

*“In 1999, SPDC soldiers arrested two villagers while they were looking after their cows near the village. They were accused of being Karen soldiers and were taken to the lower part of the village and were killed. Their bodies were buried in the same grave, but the heads were not.”*  
(Interview 31)

Many of the women chiefs described the “water torture” carried out by the SPDC. This usually involved wrapping people’s heads in plastic and then either pouring water on them or submerging their heads in water. Some of the women chiefs endured this torture themselves.

Women also described villagers being beheaded by Burma Army troops, clearly as a gruesome warning to the rest of the community not to support the Karen resistance. The women chiefs give poignant descriptions of their feelings when they need to deal with victims of such violence.

*“The Burma Army dropped mortars into the village and many innocent people were killed and injured. Ten people from the village were killed, five being from the same family. I asked for permission to view the dead bodies and when I saw them I lost my heart. I cannot express anymore than this, it is too painful for me. I have no words to express my feelings about the horrible condition of those dead bodies of the innocent people going about their livelihood. I arranged to bury all the dead bodies; this was my saddest duty.” (Interview 5)*

## **Women chiefs as targets of abuse**

Although communities chose women as chiefs in the hope they would be treated more leniently by the Burma Army than men, their stories show that they have not been exempt from abuses. Just like the men, women chiefs have been held responsible and liable to punishment and torture by the Burma Army for desertions or missing equipment, for Karen army movements and attacks, and for villagers disobeying orders.

One third of the 95 women chiefs interviewed were physically beaten or tortured, using methods employed on other villagers. Neither the women’s status as chiefs nor their gender appears to have caused the troops to exercise restraint in their brutality.

*“They started to beat and torture me. They beat me on the chest, then tied me up and beat me with a bamboo stick until the stick broke. I was then shoved into a dark room and left for two days. I felt incredible pain through my whole body.” (Interview 89)*

*“If they ask me something and I answer them but they do not believe me, they say that I lied to them and they would kick me. They pointed guns at me and hit me and one time, one of my ribs broke.” (Interview 70)*

On top of suffering similar torture to the men chiefs, the women chiefs have also had to suffer from gender-based violence. Their vulnerability to such violence appears to have been deliberately exploited by the Burma Army as a further means to intimidate and control local communities.

## **Sexual violence**

*“Most of the women village chiefs were raped by SPDC troops. They did not care whether they were single or married women.” (Interview 54)*

The women chief’s stories provide clear evidence of a prevailing climate of impunity for sexual violence by Burma Army troops. They describe incidents of gang-rape, rape of girl-children and rape-murder, committed in their villages, for which they are unable to seek redress. They also describe being forced to provide “comfort women” for the SPDC troops. One chief’s refusal to do so resulted in a fine.

The women chiefs are acutely aware of their own vulnerability to sexual violence when called out at night or forced to spend the night away from home to perform forced labour or other duties for the Burma Army.

Women are also placed at risk of sexual violence when used as hostages by the SPDC to ensure that villagers do not run away or their troops are not attacked. Said one:

*“When the road is being cleared and we have to stay overnight, the two female village chiefs had to sleep on either side of the chief of the SPDC Battalion.” (Interview 47)*

SPDC troops have also raped family members to punish the women chiefs. When one chief ran away following an attack on her village, the Burma Army troops arrested her 15-year-old daughter and gang-raped her in punishment:

*“They gang raped my daughter and physically abused her. I have six children. Five were boys and I have only one daughter. I feel so much pain that I cannot express my feelings anymore... My daughter’s life became a nightmare. She was so desperate she wanted to commit suicide. This finally resulted in her becoming mentally ill.” (Interview 22)*

Several of the chiefs also described being gang-raped.

*“I worked with our first village chief before I took over the position. One time she was called to the base by Burma Army soldiers and I accompanied her. When we arrived the soldiers did not allow me to go with her - I had to wait outside. They took her into the room and raped her. While she was a village chief she was raped by the Burma Army soldiers four times. She could not tolerate that any more so she ran away.” (Interview 54)*

*“When I was village chief and was forced to be a porter, they tied me up with ropes at night and pulled me from this side to the other side. I could not endure the torture anymore and they raped me.” (Interview 57)*

*“SPDC soldiers took me to the jungle and forced me to sleep with them for three days. They accused me of hiding Karen soldiers and slapped my face. They kicked me with their boots.” (Interview 32)*

*“(SPDC commander) Ye Naing got drunk and he started kicking the village chief’s breasts and lower body. He said that she had to take his soldiers to another village. When she explained that because she was a woman and it had become dark already it was not appropriate to guide the soldiers, the SPDC officer got angry, took out his gun and pointed it at her head, and then, having no choice, she led them to that village crying.” (Interview 5)*

## Abuses while pregnant or nursing

Women chiefs' vulnerability while pregnant or nursing has also been deliberately exploited as a means of torture by the SPDC. One pregnant woman chief was threatened that her womb would be sliced open if she did not reveal the whereabouts of Karen soldiers.

*"In 1996, while I was seven months pregnant, a column of SPDC soldiers came into the village and I was required to attend the military camp for interrogation. When I reached the military camp of Battalion 113 #9 Company, Commander Min Min Oo pointed a knife at me and said, 'I have information that the Karen soldiers are in the village; therefore tell me honestly. If you do not tell me the truth I will dissect your abdomen, take out your child and your intestines.'*

*He also pointed a gun at my head, close to my ear, and fired four bullets. I was really scared and thought that I was surely going to die. Somehow I found my courage and responded to him, 'The Karen soldiers never came to the village, if you don't believe me I will resign (as village chief) and you can kill me if you are not satisfied with my answer.' My hearing was destroyed in one ear from those bullets firing too near."* (Interview 4)

Another woman chief was ordered to undergo interrogation at a military camp even though she had just given birth.



*"The most serious difficulty I faced was in June 2004. A SPDC private from Brigade #357 surrendered to the Karen soldiers. The SPDC ordered us villagers to look for that private. It was a very risky situation as conditions were dangerous at the time and we had to keep searching and were not allowed to rest. At that time I had just delivered my baby but was required for interrogation. I had to go to the base camp. I could not walk therefore they carried me. I was taken for four days and interrogated. I felt like I was going to die."* (Interview 16)





## Voices of courage

Despite all the abuses that the women chiefs are forced to endure, their testimonies are not merely those of passive victims. On the contrary, the women frequently display a remarkable degree of strength and determination to protect the rights of their communities, regardless of all the risks and personal sacrifices.

### Overcoming fear

*“In the beginning when I started village chief activities, I had no confidence and I was afraid. On the other hand, I did not want my community faced with trouble so I continued.” (Interview 22)*

Most of the women explained they were reluctant to take on the position of village chief. They were well aware of the challenges and abuses faced by their male predecessors. One woman described being a village chief as “similar to walking between sharp knives.” (Interview 24) Several described it as “similar to digging my own grave.” (Interview 27)

Having never been in leadership roles, the women felt ill-equipped for such responsibility. As explained by one of the chiefs: “None of us have any experience of leadership and we were illiterate.” (Interview 5)

However, a strong sense of obligation towards their communities motivated many of the women to accept the position of chief:

*“If nobody was willing to serve as village chief, the villagers would be in great trouble. So even though I do not like it I have to do it.” (Interview 73)*

*“My family and some other villagers don’t want me to be leader, but I choose to do it because I am thinking about the future of my community.” (Interview 16)*

This commitment to protect their fellow villagers appears to have given the women strength to suppress their fear and serve as leaders. The degree of strength needed for this is highlighted by the women’s vivid description of their fear, as in the following story of a women chief forced to porter with other villagers:

*"I was very afraid to follow the troops. When they yelled the order "Ready" I was already shaking with fear. They give this kind of order because the battle will start soon. If I heard that order I just read the whole chapter of Psalms 23 aloud in my mind and tried to flatten myself on the ground. Sometimes during the battle some porters ran away. But for me I cannot do that because I am the village chief and I have to look after my villagers who were not trying to escape." (Interview 73)*

Another woman described battling constant fear in her position, but having to show a brave face for the sake of her community:

*"I have been slapped in my face, beaten up, shouted at, threatened and I feel scared all of the time. But the village chief is the core of the village that must stay hard." (Interview 50)*

## **Challenging injustice**

*"When I travelled and came back to the village, the SPDC questioned me about whether I had seen Karen soldiers or not. I did see them so I answered that I did. One soldier raised his hand to beat me so I held it away and nicely I asked him 'Son, did you come here to kill and mistreat civilians or to protect civilians?' Then he released me." (Interview 34)*

Despite the constant threat of violence, many of the women village chiefs dared to speak out and complain to Burma Army troops about their treatment of local communities.

Some women raised complaints about troops' behavior when summoned to meetings by the Burma Army; some boycotted such meetings in protest. One chief refused to attend a meeting after soldiers stole chickens from her village and sent the message: *"You soldiers do not serve civilians; you are thieves because you entered our houses and stole our chickens therefore you are a captain of thieves. I do not know any of you."* (Interview 5)

Some chiefs were able to seek redress and stop abuses by going to complain directly to commanding officers. One woman secured compensation after complaining to a regiment commander about a group of drunken SPDC soldiers who forced her villagers to give them a cow. Another woman managed to stop soldiers demanding alcohol from villagers by complaining to their officer.

The chief of one village ordered to relocate was even able to persuade the SPDC division commander to halt the relocation.

*“The brigade commander ordered all the villagers to relocate to another village. I begged them not to make us relocate because it was the heavy rainy season, there were no houses for us to live in at the other village and the children would face many difficulties. Some monks helped us address this serious issue to the division commander and at last we were not forced to relocate.” (Interview 5)*

However, complaints to higher authorities sometimes led to harsh repercussions not only for the chief but also other community members:

*“One time when an SPDC soldier was patrolling he started shooting with no direction. A bullet hit one villager. I complained about the incident to the Battalion Commander Officer and for this matter he accused me of being guilty and arrested me. I answered that I was not guilty and if he wanted to kill me regarding my complaining about the incident he could do so. He got angry, captured all the villagers and beat them.” (Interview 25)*

*Villagers fleeing fighting in Karen State*



Challenging soldiers in the village was even more risky. A woman who complained to SPDC soldiers about their abuses was told: *"Do not say anything. I am not afraid to kill you. Close your mouth or I'll kill you ... The soldiers beat me with bamboo and slapped my face. I saw stars and I was bleeding from my mouth."* (Interview 68)

## **Braving censure from all sides**

*"We have a saying, 'Mothers do not step on one side of the boat; they step on both sides of the boat'. It means that if you step on one side, you will drown, so you have to step on both sides to stop the boat from tipping over (in other words, to keep both sides happy)."* (Interview 59)

One of the most challenging aspects of the position of village chief is balancing the demands and interests of all parties: the Burma Army, the DKBA, the Karen resistance and villagers.

Many of the women chiefs described trying to protect Karen resistance troops. *"We had to attend (SPDC) meetings when they told us 'if you see the Karen soldiers enter the village you must inform us as fast as you can.' We work with understanding. We never informed them when the Karen soldiers entered, but after they left, we would inform them. We love our people and help them when we can."* (Interview 80)

However, in spite of this, the need to comply with SPDC demands meant that the chiefs faced blame from the Karen soldiers. *"The difficulty that I faced was that the Karen soldiers were suspicious of village chiefs. I was always having to argue with them because they accused me of favoring the Burma Army soldiers and giving more to them. I have to act wisely between the Burma Army soldiers and Karen soldiers."* (Interview 13)

Chiefs also faced similar accusations from villagers:

*"I do have some problems with a few of the villagers who see me in a negative way and criticize me. They say that I favor the Burma Army soldiers over the Karen soldiers."* (Interview 12)

Some villagers also blamed the chiefs for carrying out the orders of the SPDC. *"Sometimes when we needed villagers for the military and went to the villagers' house, they swore at me or shouted at me."* (Interview 76)

*“If I went with the SPDC, the villagers gossiped about me. If the SPDC asked for five porters, I gave five. If they asked for two, I gave two; so the villagers talked behind my back. If they don’t go I will punish them so they gossip about me. If I did not punish them the SPDC also shouted at me. Then my family says that I can stay peacefully at home but I don’t want it so that is how it has to be. The villagers gossip about you and the SPDC also shout at you, you just have to suffer from it.” (Interview 59)*

It is evidently the women’s strong commitment to their community and the conviction that they can play a role in promoting the villagers’ interests, which enables them to endure such censure.

*“I do not want to be a village chief because it is too hard to work among the SPDC, DKBA and for the Karen soldiers. However, on the other hand, I can support my villagers by speaking and advocating for them and helping them obtain peace in their village so that they can work for their own selves and their own survival.” (Interview 77)*

## **Personal sacrifice**

*“I have to work day and night for the SPDC and could not breastfeed my child. My child was starved so many times.” (Interview 54)*

On top of all the challenges and dangers faced by the women chiefs, they must face the stress of being unable to fulfill their traditional household role and care for their families.

*“Before I was a village chief, I stayed at home and looked after my family. I would do the cooking, look after the children and do housework. I also worked on the farm but since I served as village chief I do not have time to work on the farm. Currently my family and my husband manage to run the farm by themselves.” (Interview 59)*

They are frequently called away all day and all night, and sometimes for longer periods to work for the SPDC. Single mothers, already living from hand to mouth, found it particularly difficult to survive while working as chiefs.

*“I had to work for the SPDC for the whole day and when I came back home there was no rice to cook. My children do not have any food to eat, so I have to go out and look for some rice and come back to cook so we have dinner at night time. Sometimes I have to cook one milk tin of rice and put it with some of the roots of plants and eat. If I cooked like that, I can eat for one or two weeks. I cannot work to earn any money because I have no time so I just eat like that. ... Even my children were sick and I can't take care of them. I had to leave them and continue to do work for the SPDC. When I went to the SPDC troops' place, my heart was full of worry.” (Interview 71)*

Not only are the women unable to care for their families, but they have sometimes been driven into personal debt as a result of borrowing money to try and meet the demands of the SPDC troops.

While some women received support from their family members, some were blamed, particularly by their husbands, for accepting the position of chief.

*“My family did not want me to serve as village chief but I cannot do anything about it. Sometimes my husband got angry and told me that SPDC will kill me. I cannot take care of my children and do not have time to do the housework, so my family was very angry with me... My husband also accused me about the SPDC very often. He said I did not have time do the housework but I have time to work for your 'husband SPDC'.” (Interview 69)*

*“When I served as village chief, villagers encouraged me a lot but not my husband. I quarreled with him every day.” (Interview 57)*

The women's conviction that their leadership is benefiting their fellow-villagers appears to be the main factor enabling them to endure the personal hardship.

*“My parents didn't like me to be the head of the village because the responsibility was very heavy. They were worried about me as I had lifted up all the burdens of the village on my head. They asked my uncle to resign and also wanted me to resign from being the village chief. If I resigned, who would go to the SPDC? Nobody would go.” (Interview 33)*

## Changing gender attitudes

*“Currently around our village it is all female village chiefs.” (Interview 47)*

Although there have been no quantitative surveys of the number of women village chiefs, the stories in this report indicate that the practice of electing women as chiefs has now become well-established in many rural Karen areas.

The election of women was obviously born of necessity, as a direct result of the oppressive practices of the Burma Army, and had little to do with any conscious promotion of gender equality. However there can be no doubt that the experience of having women leaders, in many cases for decades now, has had an impact on community perceptions of the role of women.

Many of the women’s stories show that their communities were happy with their leadership, and even when they wanted to resign, they were begged to continue in their position. Said one: *“I became village chief in 1985 and I have served for twenty years. The community here likes me very much because I fight for the villagers.” (Interview 21)*

There is thus unquestionably now a greater acceptance of women as leaders among rural Karen communities, where men have traditionally occupied all decision-making roles.

Whether or not the practice of electing women will continue after the end of the war remains to be seen. The women themselves do not articulate any aspirations towards remaining in leadership. When voiced, their aspirations focus simply on peace for their communities.

*“I am not sure what will happen for the long term. But what I want is PEACE. I want things to get better. I want to have a simple good life. Because of the war, porters and summer work, I cannot have a proper life. If there is peace I think I will have a good life. That is what I want and all the villagers want that as well.” (Interview 59)*

What is certain, however, is that these brave women who have been risking their lives to shoulder the burdens of their communities, have proven their ability as capable leaders, and have thus paved the way for future generations of women to assume leadership roles.

# **CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY AND WAR CRIMES**

The Karen Women Organization believes that there should be a United Nations Commission of Inquiry into whether war crimes and crimes against humanity are being committed in Burma.

The human rights abuses outlined in this report should be investigated by a United Nations Commission of Inquiry, and once these facts have been verified by the Commission of Inquiry the United Nations Security Council should refer Burma to the International Criminal Court.

## **Existing international law**

Crimes against humanity and war crimes are prohibited under international law. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (“ICC Statute”), which was adopted in 1998 and came into force in July 2002, provides articulation of the principles of international criminal law. Burma is subject to many similar legal obligations under customary international law and the Geneva Conventions of 1949.

## **Crimes against humanity or war crimes**

Article 7(1) of the ICC Statute provides that “crimes against humanity” means one of a number of prohibited acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack. As such there are a number of elements to be established for a human rights violation to amount to a crime against humanity. First of all there are a number of common elements relating to the context in which the human rights violation occurred. Second the violation must be an act that falls within the list of specific violations outlawed by the ICC Statute.

A war crime is a serious violation of international humanitarian law, or the laws of war, which can give rise to individual criminal responsibility under international law. War crimes can be committed in either an international or internal armed conflict, and the situation in Burma clearly falls within the latter category. Article 8(1) of the Rome Statute provides that the ICC “shall have jurisdiction in respect of war crimes in

particular when committed as part of a plan or policy or as part of a large scale commission of such crimes.” This test is similar to the requirement of widespread or systematic but it is not absolute. It is important to note that a single act may amount to a war crime under international law. The ICC Statute provisions on war crimes which are the most relevant to Burma are Articles 8(2)(c) and 8(2)(e), which cover serious violations in conflicts of a “non-international” (or internal) character.

Testimonies in this report suggest that members of the Burma Army are perpetrating a number of prohibited acts outlawed both as war crimes and crimes against humanity against the civilian population. Moreover, the extent of the violations exposed suggests that the threshold criteria of “widespread or systematic”, or “part of a plan or policy or as part of a large scale commission of such crimes” are likely to be met.

## **Potential international crimes highlighted by the women’s testimonies**

The following outlines five of the potential violations of international law committed by the Burma Army highlighted in this report.

### ***a) Gender-based Violence***

The testimonies extracted in this report identify a number of potential international crimes involving sexual violence. Article 7(1) (g) of the ICC Statute contains the following relevant prohibited acts of sexual violence that can amount to a crime against humanity: rape; sexual violence and sexual slavery. The same three offences can amount to a war crime pursuant to Article 8 (2)(e)(vi).

The women chiefs report personal stories of rape and sexual violence, alongside that which has been perpetrated against females in their respective villages (for example Interview 54). These include instances of gang-rape by the Burma Army and the holding of women over a number of days to commit sustained attacks (for example, Interviews 57, 32, 22).

## **b) Murder and Torture**

Both murder and torture are prohibited acts in respect of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Articles 7(1)(a) and 7 (1) (f) outlaw the crimes against humanity of murder and torture respectively. Article 8(2)(c)(i) outlaws the war crimes of murder, cruel treatment and torture.

The testimonies of the female village chiefs report the systematic murder and torture of villagers by the Burma Army, including the cutting of villagers' throats and the reported use of "water torture" (see the testimony extracted at Interviews 98, 51, 87, 9, 31, 5).

The testimonies extracted in this report also provide firsthand experience of torture. In particular the fact that one third of the women chiefs interviewed had been beaten or tortured (See Interviews 89, 70, 2). Another important aspect is that their gender is used against the chiefs as an aspect of the torture perpetrated against them. For example, the testimony that a woman chief was tortured only a few days after giving birth (Interview 16).

## **International verification of abuses in Karen State, Burma**

Abuses outlined in this report add to the already substantial body of evidence from the United Nations and independent researchers and NGOs.

International concern has grown to such a level that in November 2009 the United Nations General Assembly annual resolution on Burma stated that the Assembly:

"Strongly calls upon the Government of Myanmar to take urgent measures to put an end to violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including the targeting of persons belonging to particular ethnic groups, the targeting of civilians by military operations, and rape and other forms of sexual violence, and to end impunity."

In May 2009 a report from Harvard Law School, commissioned by some of the most respected jurists in international law, used the UN's own reports to highlight how Burma's generals have potentially committed war crimes and crimes against humanity.

On May 27th 2009, the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, writing in the New York Times, stated:

“Over the past 15 years, the Burmese Army has destroyed over 3,300 villages in a systematic and widespread campaign to subjugate ethnic groups. U.N. reports indicate that Burmese soldiers have frequently recruited child soldiers, used civilians as minesweepers and forced thousands of villagers into slave labour..... I repeatedly documented the military’s many abuses in reports to the U.N. General Assembly and the U.N. Commission on Human Rights.... It is clear that the attacks in Myanmar will continue. It is equally evident that the country’s domestic legal system will not punish those perpetrating crimes against ethnic minorities. It is time for the United Nations to take the next logical step: The Security Council must establish a commission of inquiry into crimes against humanity and impunity in Myanmar.”

Other reports highlighting abuses have been published by the International Centre for Transitional Justice, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Thailand Burma Border Consortium, and others.

## CONCLUSION

The testimonies of the women chiefs constitute both a chronology of political developments in lowland areas of Karen State over the past few decades, and a harsh indictment of the military regime's consistent use of terror tactics to subjugate and control communities in these areas.

The fact that the Burma Army has deliberately targeted women chiefs for violence, particularly sexual violence, provides further evidence of the systematic nature of the regime's ongoing abuses in conflict areas. That so many of these women were singled out for torture, including barbaric "water torture" and rape, makes it clear that such incidents were not isolated cases of violence, but part of a deliberate policy to terrorize local civilian populations into submission.

In the view of the Karen Women Organization these constitute war crimes and crimes against humanity. The United Nations Security Council should establish a Commission of Inquiry into such crimes without further delay. Impunity must be ended.

The women's testimonies display extraordinary courage in seeking to protect the rights of their communities in the face of all the risks, and despite all the challenges of assuming leadership in a patriarchal and militarized society. They have unquestionably blazed a trail for future women leaders in their communities.

These brave women thus deserve recognition for their unseen sacrifices not just at the front lines of abuses by the Burma Army, but also at the forefront of the movement for gender equality in Burma.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evidence presented in this report the following recommendations are made:

### *To the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC)*

In order to address the ongoing systematic abuses against civilians in areas where the Burmese military is conducting military offensives, we demand that the SPDC:

- Immediately ceases all human rights violations against civilians, particularly women, happening on a widespread scale in the ethnic areas, including forced labour, forced relocations, torture, rape and other sexual violence committed by military personnel.
- Immediately implements a nationwide cease-fire agreement, end militarization and withdraw all troops from the ethnic areas of Burma.
- Stops all so-called development projects, such as building of roads, bridges and dams, in ethnic areas, because these lead to more militarization and human rights abuses, including forced labour, forced taxation, arbitrary arrest and looting.
- Immediately begins tripartite dialogue with ethnic representatives and the democracy movement in order to re-establish a meaningful and genuine process of democratic restoration in Burma.
- Implements all the resolutions on the situation of human rights in Burma passed by the UNGA, including the most recent resolution passed in November 2009.

### *To the Royal Thai Government*

We respectfully request that the Royal Thai Government:

- Continues to provide protection to refugees in the existing camps and promote integration in Thailand through freedom of movement, and opening opportunities for employment inside and outside the camps.

- Ensures that all new refugee arrivals fleeing from all forms of human rights abuse are permitted entry to camps.
- Does not forcibly repatriate Karen refugees to Burma, nor engage in any discussions with regard to the repatriation of Karen refugees until there is genuine peace and democracy in Burma.
- Suspends investment in projects in Burma, such as the Hatgyi dam project on the Salween River, which are causing increased militarization by the Burma Army in these areas, causing increased human rights violations and refugee flows into Thailand, and are subsidizing the regime's military expenditure.
- Takes an active role in ASEAN to use their influence with the regime to end all kinds of persecution, human rights abuses and in particular, violence against women.

*To the international community*

We urge the international community to:

- Promote and support a cross-border policy to provide immediate emergency relief and humanitarian assistance for the internally displaced persons in ethnic areas in Burma.
- Provide secure refuge and timely and appropriate service provision, in both countries of first asylum and upon resettlement, to women and girls at risk who are the survivors of rape and sexual violence.
- Ensure the safety and security of members of women's groups working to put an end to all violence against women and girls and providing services to women and girls who have suffered sexual and gender-based violence.
- Continue pressure on the Burmese military regime to begin a tripartite dialogue.
- Support the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry by the United Nations Security Council into crimes against humanity and war crimes in Burma.

*To the United Nations*

We urge:

- UN agencies operating in Burma, to bear witness publicly to the atrocities committed by the SPDC. The public visibility of these violations is critical to ensuring accountability.
- The UN Security Council, to establish a Commission of Inquiry into crimes against humanity and war crimes in Burma, in order to refer any military personnel who have committed or ordered systematized sexual and gender based crimes against women to the International Criminal Court.
- The UNSC, to pass a binding resolution which imposes a comprehensive arms embargo on Burma and demands that the SPDC military regime immediately implements a nationwide ceasefire, withdraws its troops stationed in the ethnic states, and starts meaningful dialogue.

*Finally we request all stakeholders:*

- To provide direct support to community-based women's organizations, to enable them to build on their existing skills, and carry out programs addressing the needs of communities affected by the ongoing conflict in Burma.
- To ensure that women's organizations and women's representatives can participate equally in decision-making processes affecting the future of their communities.

# SELECTED STORIES

The following are a selection of interviews from the 95 conducted for this report.

*A rural village in Karen State*



## Daw Aye Mee San's Story (Interview 4)

Daw Aye Mee San is a 51-year-old Karen, Buddhist women from Thaton District. She served as village chief for five years.

*“... When I reached the (military) camp I saw villagers who had been tortured and were tied with ropes...”*

I was obliged to serve as village chief from 1994 to 1999. I was elected because the people viewed me as a clever person with intellectual skills. None of the men dared to become the village chief. In the past they have faced severe torture and abuse and were often killed. Women village chiefs are threatened, tortured, and abused but are not usually killed.

My responsibilities include arranging for villagers to be porters. This is very hard work and they are not paid any money. It is forced labour. I also have to collect food and taxes from the local people and deliver letters for the SPDC. Sometimes letters have to be delivered to places far from the village. It is dangerous for me to travel. When I receive an order from the military, I have to complete the request quickly to avoid being beaten or killed. Sometimes the soldiers threatened to burn down our houses. Sometimes I have to beg for an assurance that the soldiers will not kill our people after they have been arrested.

Everything the military required had to be supplied by the local people and it was my job to arrange the supply. The soldiers forced us to supply large amounts of food, 4 to 5 viss (6.4kg-8kg) of chicken and 10 to 20 viss (16kg-32kg) of pork as well as alcohol and cigarettes.

I am used to the SPDC soldiers accusing me of associating with the Karen soldiers; therefore I did not show my fear. Other people in the village are not so experienced and show their fear, they get beaten.

While I received a letter written in red ink from the SPDC I could not read the words. I was imagining in my head what was going to happen and feeling great fear. I immediately rushed to the military camp without a full stomach or any water to drink. When I reached the camp I saw villagers who had been tortured and were tied with ropes. One soldier pointed a gun at me and said, “These people are Karen soldiers, right? Tell

me truthfully?” I replied “Not at all. They are people who live and work in the village”. But they do not accept my words at all.

After a long time the SPDC soldiers told me to bring them 20 viss (32kg) of pork, 5 viss (8kg) of chicken, alcohol and cigarettes and they will release the captives after they receive the goods. The soldiers always demand food from the villages and even after they receive it they do not always release the villagers as they say, instead they are often killed regardless. Villagers must ask the soldiers for permission to go outside the village to fish and gather vegetables but they need to gather the food for themselves in order to feed their families.

DKBA soldiers also came into our village frequently demanding food. I have to arrange this for them as well, sometimes it takes time. If there is a delay they start to threaten me by saying, “When Burma Army soldiers ask for food you provide it and feed them. And when we ask you for food you do not get it for us, you want to die?” In addition each household has to give annual taxes such as providing three packs of rice and 5,000 Kyat (USD\$5). When the DKBA asked for a porter and no one from the village could come, I had to arrange to pay 5,000 Kyat (USD\$5) per person.

I pleaded with the Burma Army soldiers to notify me when they have arrested someone under suspicion of associating with the Karen soldiers. I will come and look at them to see whether they are from my village or not. I beg the soldiers not to harm them until I have arrived. My voice was heard but sometimes my people had already been tortured before I arrived.

It was very hard for the people in our village. Even when we provided everything the soldiers asked for we were still beaten, tortured and killed. We had no human rights. Village people had a lot of trouble providing for themselves and their families at this time. Life was very hard and many felt like they could not continue.

I was tortured by the SPDC many times.. In 1996, while I was seven months pregnant, a column of SPDC soldiers came into the village and I was required to attend the military camp for interrogation.

When I reached the military camp of Battalion 113 #9 Company, Commander Min Min Oo pointed a knife at me and said, “I have

information that the Karen soldiers are in the village; therefore tell me honestly. If you do not tell me the truth I will dissect your abdomen, take out your child and your intestines”.

He also pointed a gun at my head, close to my ear, and fired four bullets. I was really scared and thought that I was surely going to die. Somehow I found my courage and responded to him, “The Karen soldiers never came to the village, if you don’t believe me I will resign (as village chief) and you can kill me if you are not satisfied with my answer”. My hearing was destroyed in one ear from those bullets firing too near. The Burma Army soldiers column who entered in to the village was Battalion (113) Company Commander Min Min Oo and his troops.

No one else from my community wanted to become village chief, therefore I did not have any problems with the village people, including my family about whether they appreciated my administration or not.

As village chief I always tried my best and participated in forced labour. I carried 20 viss (32kg) of ammunition on some occasions. Women in the village could not avoid forced labour because the SPDC soldiers insisted that women participate. When the villagers are forced to work as porters we have to sleep under the trees with no cover even when it is raining. Only a small amount of rice is provided to us - just enough to survive on. The men were forced to carry very heavy loads, including ammunition, when the weight was more than 30 viss (48kg).

If any of the villagers became weak and were not physically able to continue to carry the goods, the soldiers would kick, beat and scold them. Villagers who become too sick to carry their load were left in the jungle by the track. Many of these people died. This did not only happen in my village, other villages also faced this same situation.

As village chief I have to attend meetings hosted by the SPDC at a village far away. I left at 8am and arrived at 3pm. It took one full day to travel the distance. One of the section leaders accompanied me. In the meeting the SPDC had discussions and made decisions but did not involve the village chiefs, I was only able to listen and follow the orders given by the SPDC. The people of the villages had no control over their own lives - nobody was listening to us.

I resigned from my position as village chief because my health was declining. One time when I was very ill, a medic from the Burma army soldiers gave me an injection. Ever since I was given that medicine my eyes do not see clearly.

I did not want to experience any more human right violations by the SPDC soldiers therefore I left my village together with my nephew. It took us three days of walking to arrive at the border.

### **Daw Pyone May's Story (Interview 5)**

**Daw Pyone May is a 53-year-old Karen, Buddhist women from Dooplaya District. When she was 10, both her parents were killed by SPDC soldiers. Daw Pyone May is a widow with three children. While guiding the SPDC she was caught in crossfire and was shot in the leg. Unable to afford effective medical attention, she is now disabled.**

*“I was hit by a bullet and fell down”*

After I become village chief the name Daw Pyone May was given to me by the Burma Army. After my parents were killed my sister and I were looked after by a relative. We did not get a chance to be educated. I married and had two daughters and one son. My husband died in a natural disaster and I earn my living by cultivating crops to feed my children.

One day the Burma Army troops were patrolling along the side of my village and committed many human rights violations. They burned down the villages, killed people and falsely accused villagers of associating with the Karen soldiers. There is frequent combat occurring near our village, which means that villagers live with very unstable conditions and experience constant fear.

In the first week of January, 1989, the Burma Army increased their operations. The Burma Army soldiers forced us to build a compound for them based right in the village. After that combat occurred every two or three days and local people were hit by artillery and injured by bullets. Many died as a result of their wounds.

The Burma Army arrested suspected villagers and killed them; others were caught and used as forced labour to build the military compound, canal, warehouses and offices. My people were forced to build a fence around the military compound. They had to collect all of the wood and bamboo that was needed for this job. People who escaped had all their property confiscated by the Burma Army. Their houses were destroyed and their animals stolen; in effect they lost everything they owned. If the Burma Army found them they were killed.

At this time no men dared to work as village chief as it was very dangerous for them because they were often subjected to torture and then murdered. Some villages relied on monks to be their leaders. Many people were so afraid for their safety that they lived in the jungle, others relocated to other villages. Many women facing complications with their pregnancies died because there was no one to help deliver their babies. There were no medicines to help sick people recover.

After one month of intensive Burma Army military operations, two thirds of the population had been lost. Under these most desperate circumstances, a monk leader invited me and two other villagers to discuss the current situation in the village. I was very pleased to become involved in helping and protecting the community. This is why I was appointed village chief.

A monk brought the three of us to the Burma Army soldiers and introduced us. None of us had any experience of leadership and we were illiterate. We did however try our best, and with very important issues we referred them to this monk to assist us. When we are afraid to go to a place we asked this monk to accompany us.

As a village chief I have to engage between the village people and the Burma Army soldiers. I have to consider the wellbeing of my people while trying to keep the Burma Army soldiers happy at the same time. When the soldiers confiscate goods and property such as rice, cows, buffaloes and household belongings, I have to go and negotiate with them and beg and plead them to return some. I also have to ask permission for the villagers to go out to work on the farms so the community can grow food for the people.

When the Burma Army and Karen soldiers exchanged fire in the village, the Burma Army dropped mortars into the village and many innocent people were killed and injured. Ten people from the village were killed, five being from the same family. I asked for permission to view the dead bodies and when I saw them I lost my heart. I cannot express anymore than this, it is too painful for me. I have no words to express my feelings about the horrible condition of those dead bodies of the innocent people going about their livelihood.

I arranged to bury all the dead bodies; this was my saddest duty. I came back late to the village and for this reason the Burma Army falsely accused me of meeting with the Karen soldiers and having connections with them. This night I did not have any patience left after that horrible day. I addressed the Burma Army soldiers directly and told them, "If you were not based here in the village the community might not face this terrible situation and they would not have been killed. Because of the Burma Army soldiers carrying out their operations, the community is faced with much hardship and violations which cause their deaths". Then I went home.

As village chief I had to engage with all parties and communicate between them all. I had to look for all the things that are demanded by soldiers. The village men were too afraid to get involved therefore I have no choice. I received information that a villager had died at a nearby farm, therefore I went and arranged prayers with the villagers. At night, the Platoon Commander Aye Ko, Myo Myint Naing and Battalion Commander Kyi Win and their followers came to the prayer ceremony and arrested five villagers. They started to seriously beat them, after a while they took the men back to their base.

In the morning I went to the military base and asked for the return of the five people who were arrested the previous night and one soldier told me, "I did not see anything". I explained to him that last night five people from the village were arrested at the funeral house and were brought here to the base. "How come you don't know?" He told me to ask his captain and told me that the five people arrested were not ordinary villagers they were Karen soldiers. "You can go and see their faces at the detention centre, they have very mean faces." When I went to see them in detention they had very serious injuries and it was clear that they had been tortured.

I told a soldier that if you do not release them I will address the issue to the Battalion Commander. Nothing happened, so I went to see the Battalion Commander and asked him why the five people arrested now had serious injuries and did he know who was guilty of this crime. I told him that as head of the village I have an obligation to protect my people. I let him know that the villagers would not dare to continue living in this village if you beat and torture innocent people, like you have done to the five captives. He replied that they are supposed to stay in the village, and they should not stay out over night outside the village playing cards, therefore because they do this they must be Karen soldiers. I answered him that they were real villagers and their relatives had just died. They were arranging the funeral and many people from the village were gathering just for this funeral. I also mentioned that he did not inform me immediately that they had been arrested. I told him I could have clarified the situation about the funeral arrangements. I pleased the Battalion Commander Officer with 1 viss (1.6kg) of chicken and asked him to release the five people. I put in writing my promise that they are not Karen soldiers, that they are ordinary villagers.

Two months later near the village more fighting broke out. Three young men who were looking after cows drew the attention of the Burma Army. They had noticed that one of them was injured. The Burma Army soldiers immediately accused them of being spies for the Karen soldiers. They were seriously beaten and taken into the military camp. I was asked to go and confirm whether they were villagers or not. When I reached the camp I saw that they had injuries to their whole body, they had been brutally beaten.

I confirmed to the officer that they were indeed ordinary villagers who worked as herders (looking after cows). When the fighting broke out their cows disappeared and they were looking for their cows when one got an injury (from walking through the jungle). They were not Karen soldiers. I strongly denied they were Karen soldiers and I was asked to sign my promise to gain their release.

The Burma Army soldiers were patrolling alongside the village and arrested a 25-year-old man while he was asleep at his home. His house was located at the corner of the village. He was accused of being a Karen soldier. The Burma Army tied him up with rope and tortured him. He was very badly mistreated. Not only was he beaten he was also burned and

stabbed. His sister, a monk and three villagers had to sign an agreement and he was finally released.

The situation was getting worse and worse in late 1997. I was village chief and at that time some Karen soldiers surrendered to the SPDC. There was now a cease fire but still the villagers could not live peacefully because the community was very afraid. The community was still forced to work as porters, messengers and to provide food for the soldiers. After the heavy fighting the military compound needed to be repaired so the villagers were forced to do this work too.

The SPDC soldiers on patrol had been attacked by Karen troops and the deputy battalion commander and platoon commander were injured. For this matter the brigade commander ordered all the villagers to relocate to another village. I begged them not to make us relocate because it was the heavy rain season (monsoon) and there were no houses for us to live in at the other village and the children would face many difficulties there. Some monks helped us address this serious issue to the division commander and at last we were not forced to relocate.

The military camp is not based in the village anymore but we still have to serve as porters and do forced labour such as looking for wood and bamboo to build a military camp in a nearby village. The community members have to work once every three days to complete the requirements of the SPDC soldiers. When the soldiers ask for porters they say they will be needed for three days but they kept them for fifteen days. Each time 5 people were demanded, including females. When villagers tried to avoid being a porter the soldiers gave out serious punishments.

SPDC Colonel Kyi Win, Aye Ko and Myo Myint Aung led a column of soldiers, which requested 12 villagers for three days of porter duties. After three days they did not return, and their families were worrying and came to me to ask me to approach the SPDC soldiers. A soldier told me that we can not release them and he thought that they were in another village.

I was aware that the SPDC did not feed the porters enough and they have to carry heavy loads. I knew their backs and shoulders would be aching terribly. They mentioned to me that one porter could no longer carry his load therefore he was killed. We understood that the SPDC would not release those porters easily. They do not have any money to buy food and

when they become weak and cannot carry the load anymore porters are beaten.

I approached the colonel and addressed the issue of the twelve villagers who were serving as porters. He told me that it is not easy to release them at this time, he has no option, and if they escape it will be my responsibility. I told him that you asked for only three days of porter duties and now they have served for fifteen days already. Their families were worrying about them and I was getting blamed by their families.

He raised another option, "If you bring other villagers to replace them I could release them". I answered that, "As you did not inform me in advance that I can bring people to replace them, and if you continue expecting our community to work with this type of arrangement, in future it will become much harder for the villagers to continue to serve as porters for the SPDC soldiers". He replied, "Don't worry about it. When they arrive at the other village, I will release them".

In the meantime I could hear gunshots and I thought that fighting was about to occur, but it was because a porter managed to escape and SPDC soldiers were shooting at that porter. I immediately shouted out, "Don't shoot at the porters - they are from my village. I will follow and try to convince him to continue with porter duties". I immediately followed the porter.

Of the twelve porters, ten managed to escape and two remained until they reached another village and were released. According to the two remaining porters that arrived back at the village, the SPDC officer was very angry with me and mentioned that the village chief is very clever. "She told us she was going to follow the escaped porters and send them back, she did not do that, she tricked us; if I see her I will kill her". The two villagers who returned from porter duties were in very poor condition, they became ill and died.

I told the villagers to tell the SPDC if they came looking for me that I and ten porters had escaped to the border. I will never come back to the village. We did all of the things they asked us to do, yet they still are not pleased with us and they punished us anyway. The village people have to pay money not to receive punishment.

Two weeks later Colonel Kyi Win and his soldiers arrived at the village and asked for the village chief. The village people followed my instructions and told the soldiers I had left the village. He only said that the village chief is very intelligent. At this stage I was hiding in the jungle until he and his soldiers were transferred out of the area.

I was a committed village chief and I tried my best to be a good leader. Sometimes I quit for a while and then continued. I served until I became disabled and could not continue anymore. The reason I became disabled was because of the SPDC under Brigade #88, Light Infantry #416 column #2, led by Ye Naing on 14 October 2002. It was about 5pm when they came into the village to have a meal cooked for them. They requested two villagers to come and meet them immediately. Because they were delayed, they were yelled at by SPDC troops. When we finally arrived at the village, the SPDC accused us of consulting with the Karen troops first. We explained to the SPDC that I suffer from high blood pressure and feel dizzy, that is why I was delayed, and for this he accused us of not caring about them.

Later, Ye Naing got drunk and he started kicking one of my friends who was a village chief's, breasts and lower body, and he said to my friend that she had to take them to another village. When she explained to the SPDC that because she was a woman and it had become dark already it was not appropriate to guide the soldiers. The SPDC officer got angry, took out his gun and pointed it at her head, and then, having no choice, she led them to that village crying. Next time they came to me, and asked me and another woman to lead them to that same village. We two women must walk at the front to ensure that the path is clear of landmines.

Before we arrived at the village it was attacked by Karen troops. I was hit by a bullet and fell down. My fellow villager heard my shouting but as it was dark she could not see anything. Bullets were crossing around us and soon after a medic arrived to dress my leg. There was no injection or medicine. My leg was bleeding and my fellow villager had to carry me back. They dropped me at a nearby village and paid 3,000 Kyat to the villagers to look after me while they continued patrolling.

Villagers were looking for medicine so they could treat me. The next day we caught a boat to a local hospital but the hospital did not accept me. I had to seek medication at a District hospital and for the transportation

the villagers all contributed. The treatment was going to cost about 400,000 Kyat (USD\$400) and I could not pay that amount. I returned to my village and continued treatment with herbal medicine. Since that bullet wound I could not walk normally. I have become disabled and am now suffering much hardship as I have three children to take care of.

Our hatred of the Burma Army soldiers is growing. The Burma Army harass and mistreat innocent villagers in various ways; such as killing, physical abuse, rape, relocation, looting and burning down houses and villages. They commit serious human rights violations on the innocent villages. They do not provide any benefit to the villagers in any way. If they showed kindness to us we would not hesitate to help them. This is all I can remember and share with you.

### **Daw Shee Law's Story (Interview 7)**

Daw Shee Law is now 47 years old. She is a Karen, Buddhist women from Thaton District. Daw Shee Law became village chief when she was only 18. She was imprisoned for three months for arguing with the SPDC about their mistreatment of villagers.

*“...You soldiers do not serve civilians; you are thieves because you entered our houses and stole our chickens...”*

I become village chief when I was only 18. I was elected by the village people.

As village chief I had to engage with the SPDC including the DKBA about their activities and, when required by either of them, I had to show up. One very serious experience I had during my time as village chief was when Battalion #318 under Colonel Min Hla Aung arrived in the village. He arrested a young boy at his mother's house and killed him in front of his mother and other villagers.

I have to fully engage with the activities of the SPDC and have no time to work at my own job. Now fortunately, the requirement for forced labour is decreasing from the SPDC. Once a year our village has to pay 400,000 or 500,000 Kyat (USD\$400 -\$500) to the DKBA.

One time the Burma army soldiers arrested a young boy and he managed to escape. For this matter they ordered the villagers to pay a fine of 2,000,000 Kyat (USD\$2000). How can villagers have such a huge amount of money to pay them? I collected money from all the individual households and the total amount was only 150,000 Kyat (USD\$150) and I delivered the money to them.

Captain Maung Kyi is the one who ordered us to pay the money, and he says that the village chief has the responsibility for the boy who managed to escape. He also mentioned to the villagers that they should not assign a woman as village chief, they should ask for a man to serve. I responded that I have worked as village chief for many years and for my next life I still wanted to be village chief so I could serve my community.

One time the soldiers told me that they lost a machine. I told them I will report it to their superior. They refused to allow me to make the report and instead they made me choose between two options. One was to collect money from the villagers and the second option was to contact the Karen soldiers and ask them to provide another machine. They told me to get the price or the value of the machine they have lost. I am looking for an excuse so I do not have to do this job. I lied and told them that the Karen soldiers were setting up landmines and if they have to patrol maybe they will disappear and I told them not to go. The DKBA then told me not to travel, but if I do have to travel I must first pray and request the monks to bless me. Later on Captain Than Htun and Captain Moe Joe from a column of DKBA soldiers suggested to me that I might want to move to another village because I talk too much.

Once some people came into the village and gave us some money (may have been humanitarian aid). Each household received 7,500 Kyat (USD\$7). A Burmese captain asked me how much money I received and I told him that I had spent the money already and don't have any left.

Many Burma Army soldiers arrived at a nearby village. They set up camp there and confiscated chickens from the village people. The next day they asked me to meet with them. I refused to meet them and delivered a message, "You soldiers do not serve civilians; you are thieves because you entered our houses and stole our chickens therefore you are a captain of thieves. I do not know any of you". They arrested one villager who was later released.

The SPDC asked me to get 20 village people for work. I said I cannot do that, and they said if I will not supply them they will go and arrest 20 people themselves. I argued with them and told them you cannot arrest innocent people. For this matter a Captain reported my behavior to his superior Battalion Commander. For this crime I was detained for three months. After I was released and came back home Captain Sann Pe confiscated my violin and I had to go to the base and retrieve it.

On the 8th of September, Captain Than Htun and Captain Moe Joe from the DKBA came into the village and met with me. They interrogated me about information they had about Karen soldiers asking for a machine and a village headwoman delivering the machine to them. Therefore I was under suspicion and required for interrogation. I told them I have no idea what they are referring too, but they did not believe me. For my punishment they cut my hair roughly. Three other village women were included in this interrogation. One of them was pregnant at the time and they threatened to split open her abdomen and take out the child. I was very scared to hear these things but I had no choice, I could not escape.

Under Colonel Commander Min Hla Aung's era I had to work as a porter and was faced with the most difficult time. He asked villagers to serve as porters and if they escaped, he will kill me. Min Hla Aung also demanded people from the village to show him where the Karen soldiers are based. The villagers were beaten and tortured very badly regardless of what they told the Burma army soldiers.

Once a month I had to attend a SPDC-hosted meeting. I had to travel to get there. The soldiers under column Commander Colonel Hsann Aung have been responsible for many civilian deaths. I received an order that I had to go and speak to a villager and his wife. When I got there the Burma army soldiers had already killed the couple. I contacted one of the village elders and was told that the Burma army soldiers might have mistreated them so badly that it was not possible to take them to hospital because the community would find out and they would get a bad reputation. Therefore that elder said they must have been killed in secret to avoid any problems. We never did find out where the bodies were.

It is not easy to be the village chief. I became village headwoman in my village but not in the other villages. I continued because no one else would take on the role. I was not happy and felt a great deal of stress all of the time.

## Daw The Rit's Story (Interview 8)

Daw The Rit is 51 years old. She is from Thaton District. She was chosen to be the village chief because she is a widow and felt obligated to accept.

*“... We, the villagers, are afraid of every armed group...”*

I have served as village chief for 17 years. I was elected by the community. I'm a widow and that is why the previous village chief asked me to help. The previous village chief is over 80 years old and the community thought that it was time to choose a replacement. In the beginning I did not want to accept but I was a widow and had no job, so the villagers proposed me and I accepted.

I worked for many years and wanted to resign but no one would replace me, therefore I could not resign and I think I will have to do this job for the rest of my life. The community members are too afraid to deal with the SPDC, so I feel that I have no choice. I always try my best for my community here. When the soldiers asked me to provide people as porters, I did my best. One time three porters were required for five days. We have a routine in the village, so the porter's duties are shared. Sometimes I am required to find 20 people for porter duties and when the order is received they must be ready. Now the situation is a little better - only when the soldiers arrive in the village in person and request porters do I have to supply people.

The demand for porters has decreased but one time I have to supply four people but they are gone for 10-12 days before being released. The most challenging time for me was when a Karen soldier got arrested. I had to take a huge risk and acknowledge him as a local village person to secure his release. Each time the DKBA came into the camp searching for Karen soldiers we stated the same information and had no serious problems.

I do not get any financial support for my family. I have three children and have to send them to school, so I need to borrow money. When I have to deal between the DKBA and SPDC troops I feel that some of them were not very loyal. The Battalion Commanders were only concerned with their own benefit and were not good leaders to their men.

Some of the community listened to me but others did not. I have one villager who is an alcoholic and always drunk. He always blamed me when things went wrong. Most villagers are good people and we maintain a sense of unity in this village.

I also have to serve as a porter sometimes but most of the time other villagers were called up to serve. Each time three persons were required for five days. In the rainy season or rice growing season I have to look for up to 20 porters. When the SPDC troops demanded things I had to complete the requirement. Villagers did not get money for this service, it was forced labour. When the village people are on porter service they have to bring their own rice to survive. Some SPDC troops offered meals to porters but many did not.

Currently the SPDC say the porters will only be used for a short trip and when they reach another village they will be released. Women are used most as porters. They have to carry rice and “clean the route” (look for landmines). Men are most often involved in guiding the soldiers.

Men in the village have to work to support their families and this is why women serve as porters more often. I do not want the SPDC troops to order us around anymore. A previous Captain Khin Nyunt told his soldiers not to ask villagers for any labour, but when I repeated his words to other soldiers they replied that they only use village labour when we are in a difficult situation.

The SPDC also justified using village labour by saying that because we had helped the Karen soldiers we therefore have to help them as well. Some villagers associate with SPDC troops and some have connections with Karen soldiers and the DKBA. All of these groups came to the village and leave messages and information for each other for the village people to pass on. As you can imagine this causes a lot of confusion and misunderstandings between local people and the various groups of soldiers.

I felt that it was my duty to let the soldiers know that they are exploiting the villagers. The constant military patrolling in the area meant that the villagers are facing many hardships with this unstable situation. Those who have money moved to the city but those who are poor remain in the village to face these difficulties. Some SPDC officers used their diplomacy

skills and told me that they also do not want to stay in the jungle but their superiors assign them here they have no choice. Others told me that they are not happy using villagers as labour, but because of the assignments they are expected to complete they have no other options.

Yet other soldiers told me that because villagers are hiding Karen soldiers, if you show us where they are, we will kill them and then the entire situation will become stable and you all can live with peace. I told them how can I know where the Karen soldiers are based if I do not see them and I dare not ask where they are based. If I know I could show you. The Karen soldiers are human just like you and they also fear death.

When SPDC soldiers entered the village they ask villagers to dive into the river to see if Karen soldiers are hiding there. When they saw blankets at the farm they brought them to show to the villagers and told us that they belonged to Karen soldiers.

I mentioned to the SPDC soldiers that when you demand food and goods from us we are afraid of you and also the Karen soldiers. We, the villagers, are afraid of every armed group. Your soldiers do not completely protect us when you fight Karen soldiers, so it is no surprise that they attack you.

### **Daw That Pu's Story (Interview 9)**

**Daw That Pu is a 49-year-old Karen, Buddhist woman from Thaton District. Despite being a village chief, Daw That Pu was required to work as a porter. She was also forced by the SPDC to bury their dead soldiers.**

*“...I think about the goods that I have to transport for the soldiers. The bullets are to kill me; the chilies will make the houses burn and the charcoal will turn the village into an incinerator...”*

I became a village chief in 1994 and I served for ten years. I was elected by the villagers. As a village chief I had to work between the community and the SPDC. The SPDC demanded that we villagers provide them with thatch roof tiles, bamboo, chickens and pork.

The most challenging times were when the community could not fulfill the demands of the SPDC. I have to work as a porter, packing and transporting ammunition, charcoal and chilies for them. I feel that it is not good for me to do this work but I have no choice. The SPDC soldiers forced our community to labour for them and so did the DKBA soldiers.

The DKBA required me to look for porters in the village and each time ten persons are forced to do this work and are not paid. When they asked for pork I have to provide it. If I was having trouble filling the requirements they would yell at me and force me to supply the goods. One time they ordered me to look for 20 viss (14kg) of pork and one radio. If I could not provide the items I have to pay 50,000 Kyat (USD\$50). I told the DKBA that I could not manage to find their requirements on this occasion. The DKBA did not accept my answer. It was the most challenging time for me and I ended up having to collect 700 Kyat from each household.

I think about the goods that I have to transport for the soldiers. The bullets are to kill me; the chilies will make the houses burn and the charcoal will turn the village into an incinerator. When I received an order I have to complete the requirement without making any excuses.

I got threatened by the SPDC soldiers. A captain pointed a gun at me and yelled, "I am a captain. If I order you to die, then you must die and if I say you can live, you can live. If I order the men in my command to kill you, they must kill you".

In 1997 SPDC column Platoon #27 under Captain Kyauk Ke ordered me to provide one radio intercept unit radio. I was faced with a very difficult situation. I was feeling very miserable and afraid. Light Infantry column # 18 Captain Than Htun pointed a gun at me and threatened me. He was very rude and sometimes he did not allow me to rest at my house. They gave no thought to my privacy. Whether it was day or late night, whenever they needed me I had to show up.

Captain Moe Joe from the DKBA sent a messenger to take me to his base. When I met him he told me that he would come to have a meal at my house. He also asked me to provide 2 viss (3.2kg) of sugar cane. I provided this for him. He wanted me to look for men. I told him that I could not find any men willing to work. He then threatened to stab me in the neck.

On the whole the village people were pleased with me. Even as village chief I had to participate in porter duties. Each time it took me one whole day. One time I had to go in the night time. The SPDC soldiers did not feed me. With a heavy load I had to climb a mountain. After we reached a village I was released.

Colonel Aye Ko from Platoon #306 tied up a villager and some other boys and beat them up. I went to the officer and told him that they were villagers and please do not beat them. Later the SPDC released two of my villagers. He also told me that this territory belongs to Karen soldiers; therefore he had to use excessive force with the suspects because that is what he is expected to do.

Captain Mya Lwin from the SPDC requested that the villagers provide thatch roof tiles and bamboo on an annual basis. When the soldiers arrived in the village they demanded ducks and chickens. Captain Saw Min from the DKBA demanded chickens and pork. I had to attend the SPDC hosted meeting in another village. When I had to go I asked a friend to accompany me. It took me half a day of travel to get to that meeting.

I am not happy being the village chief. I am faced with too many problems. When combat occurred near our village, three SPDC privates were killed. When I saw the dead bodies I felt so sad that I could not eat. It is my duty to bury the dead bodies. At this point I wanted to resign as village chief.

In our village there are two village headwomen. Women took over the role of village leader because the men are too afraid to take this job. Men village heads have been killed by the SPDC. I have not moved to any other village. I have always lived here.

I will not continue as the village chief anymore. An officer of Brigade #66 from the SPDC used to threaten me by saying that “every village chief has to ‘drink water’ (water torture) and you have not done this, so be careful”.

## Daw Tin Own's Story (Interview 16)

Daw Tin Own is 44. She is a Karen, Buddhist woman from Thaton District. Daw Tin Own was interrogated and tortured by the SPDC and forced to work as a porter on numerous occasions. Days after the birth of her baby she was forced to attend the military base for interrogation. She was held for four days and did not expect to live through the ordeal.

*"...My family and some other villagers do not want me to be leader, but I choose to do it because I am thinking about the future of my community..."*

I became village chief in 2000. As the situation is not stable I faced various difficulties. Before me there were four or five different leaders. Two women were former village chiefs. The previous village heads faced many more problems than me. Each time the SPDC came into the village they gave us serious trouble.

As village chief I have to take responsibility for the well being of the community. I have to deal with the SPDC and the people from the resistance movement. When the SPDC require guards, messengers or forced labour I have to find people from my village willing to do this work. I have faced many problems and difficulties, especially when I fail to provide what is required. Once I was threatened with a knife and a gun. Villagers also got punished. I have to give my time fully to the SPDC soldiers and even just after my baby was born I had to go and meet with them.

The most serious difficulty I faced was in June 2004. A SPDC private from Brigade #357 surrendered to the Karen soldiers. The SPDC ordered us villagers to look for that private. It was a very risky situation as conditions were dangerous at the time and we had to keep searching and were not allowed to rest. At that time I had just delivered my baby but was required for interrogation. I had to go to the base camp. I could not walk therefore they carried me. I was taken for four days and interrogated. I felt like I was going to die. We have faced various human rights violations committed by SPDC troops. Sometimes we have to provide and deliver food stuffs to the Karen soldiers as well.

In the beginning I did not have any interest in being the village chief and I was not happy because I have to deal with SPDC, Karen soldiers and the DKBA. I felt that I am in deep trouble most of the time. On the other hand I need to look out for the well being of my community. That is why I continued being the village chief. My family and some other villagers do not want me to be leader, but I choose to do it because I am thinking about the future of my community.

Even though I was the village leader I had to serve as porter with the villagers. Previously while villagers were serving as porters they were mistreated and beaten. I did not witness this with my eyes. The SPDC soldiers demanded money, chickens and pigs from the villages. I have to collect them using a quota system.

I had to attend meetings hosted by the SPDC. It was six miles away and the meeting was usually scheduled for the morning. As village chief I am depressed because I am always facing trouble with the SPDC. When we have difficulty the community tries to resolve it with peace and unity. I do not move to any other village and at present I am village leader.

### **Daw Way Way Thein's Story (Interview 27)**

**Daw Way Way Thein is a 51-year-old Buddhist, Karen woman who previously resided in Thaton District. As village chief she was beaten during interrogation by Burma Army troops.**

*“...I had no voice to express...I was not happy being village chief. It was similar to digging my own grave...”*

I do not remember which year I became village chief but I served for five years. I was appointed by my community and dealt between the community and Burma army soldiers. When they (the Burma Army soldiers) demanded rice I had to collect it from villagers and deliver it.

When my mother died in her village I went to my mother's village for the funeral and on the way there the Burma Army soldiers captured me and questioned me. They asked me how many Karen soldiers were coming into the village. Because I had no idea I answered that “I do not see, and do not know.” They called me a liar, beat me and fined me 5,000 Kyat.

I have faced trouble because the SPDC and DKBA troops threatened me and fined my villagers without any reason. I did not remember their names and would never dare to record them either. I had no problem with the community or my family during the time I served as village chief. When I was village chief I did not participate as a porter or in forced labour. The SPDC demanded annual taxes and when they asked for bamboo and roofing materials I had to collect them from the community and deliver the goods. As the village chief I had to attend meetings hosted by SPDC and listen. I had no voice to express. The meeting took place in other villages and I had to go early in the morning. I was not happy being village chief. It is similar to digging my own grave. Before me there was a woman village chief but I do not remember her name.

### **Daw San Tin's Story (Interview 29)**

Daw San Tin is an 80-year-old Buddhist woman of Karen ethnicity. She previously lived in Thaton District. As village chief she witnessed and experienced physical abuse, false imprisonment, torture and intimidation at the hands of the SPDC. She has been left with permanent physical and emotional damage as a consequence of this mistreatment and had no option but to flee as a refugee.

*“... They would put my face in a plastic (bag) and throw water on me. I could hardly breathe...”*

I served as village chief for ten years. When men served as village chief they were seriously mistreated by Burma Army soldiers. Moreover, the Burma Army accused them of having connections to the Karen soldiers and killed them. Because of these accusations and killings, men do not dare to serve as village chiefs anymore.

Since then more women were appointed as village chief. I started to work as village chief in 1985. After I was appointed I had to take responsibility (for the needs of) Burma Army soldiers. When they demanded food stuff such as chickens, pigs and cows, I had to arrange and deliver them. I was asked to attend meetings to listen to the orders and then complete the orders. I have to explain to the Burma Army soldiers not to have negative attitudes toward the village chief or the community.

When Burma Army soldiers arrested suspicious villagers I had to give my acknowledgement for the villagers' release. The soldiers demanded pigs, cows and rice and I had to arrange and provide them. I had to look for porters when they required them, and additional villagers were forced to go and do road construction whether they were willing or not. When Karen soldiers entered the village they did not give us any trouble and villagers provided rice and other food stuffs. Villagers are faced with difficulty because the Burma Army soldiers do not permit villagers to go outside the village and work. They prohibited villagers' freedom of movement.

One harvest time they falsely accused some villagers of having connections to the Karen soldiers and killed them. In addition, they confiscated rice that was kept by villagers. They blamed me as I was hiding Karen soldiers' families and beat me and threatened me. I always spoke to them softly and begged them not to physically abuse villagers. I told them that villagers were doing their best to follow the orders and complete the requirement of the SPDC.

The Burma Army hit me and punished me. Karen soldiers never beat me. The Burma Army threatened me with guns and knives. They would not only beat me, they would put my face in a plastic bag and throw water on me. I could hardly breathe. They mistreated me because they found out that one woman villager was the wife of a Karen soldier. They arrested me and that woman, and we were sent to prison for a month and then released.

While I was in prison, Burma Army soldiers interrogated me and seriously mistreated me. My ear drum was broken and now I cannot hear very well. A person who mistreated me was Lieutenant Tin Lwin. I do not remember which troops he belonged to. My family did not encourage me to serve as village chief as it is risky. My family was worrying about me and my family was afraid that the Burma Army was going to kill me. I had no time for my family.

Villagers were pleased by my leadership. I looked forward to the expectations of the villagers and the benefits. As a villager I had to participate as a porter. I had to carry ammunition and I think it weighed 20 viss (32kgs) - very heavy. Male porters were beaten but women were not beaten during service. During the day porters had to carry Burma

Army belongings and at night they tied porters up with rope so that they would not try to escape. Each time villagers served as porters for over a month. They did not ask for tax because they confiscated all the villagers' rice.

Even though they did not ask for taxes they always demanded different things. Whenever Burma Army soldiers entered the village they demanded a cow or a pig. I had to look for it and provide it in time with no excuses. If I could not provide it villagers were threatened and got into trouble. I provided first and then collected money from villagers. I repaid the money to the owner later.

I also had to attend meetings. One time I addressed the issue about Burma Army soldiers falsely accusing and killing villagers without searching or finding any evidence but I did not get any response. When I went for meetings my colleague accompanied me. I do not know how to express my feelings about being a village chief because I was seriously mistreated while serving. In addition, sometimes I had to use my own expenditure and provide for Burma Army troops.

The village chief job puts you in a risky position and is dangerous, but because I love my nation I work for my community. A former female village chief served for twenty years but she has passed away. She faced extreme mistreatment by the Burma Army and her beloved son was killed.

My daughter married a Karen soldier so I resigned from my role as village chief and escaped to the border. In addition, the Burma Army committed human rights violations to villagers and prohibited everything! There has been great hardship for villagers. I was disappointed and had no will to continue living in the village. To hide in another village it was not possible for us to survive. My son-in-law is an expert on the jungle so the family escaped to the border.

## Daw San Pyu's Story (Interview 30)

Daw San Pyu is a 45-year-old Buddhist, Karen woman from Thaton District. Despite the gross injustices that Daw San Pyu has suffered, like many village chiefs, her loyalty and commitment to her community motivates her continued service.

*“...A private from No.1 army Battalion got injured by a land mine and for this reason, the villagers, including myself, were threatened and beaten...”*

I became village chief in 1986 and I have served for eighteen years. I became village chief because SPDC soldiers troubled and mistreated the villagers. I used to work for the Karen soldiers. In the village there were two women village chiefs. They faced more risk compared to me. As village chief I have to take responsibility for dealings between the community and the SPDC. I have to serve as messenger for the SPDC and when they demanded forced labour I had to provide it.

I was in a difficult situation while dealing with the SPDC troops. Whenever I fail to complete the SPDC soldiers' requirements I got threatened with knives and guns. In addition I had to carry my baby and accompany SPDC soldiers while they were patrolling. Moreover, they forced me to provide them with supplies of pigs. In 1996, a private from No.108 army battalion became a deserter and was killed in between my village and a neighbouring village. Because of this incident, the SPDC approached me and ordered me to look for the private and pay for the value of his gun.

Every year, the DKBA demanded 2,000 roofs and I regularly had to provide them. In 2001 a private from No.1 army battalion got injured by a land mine and for this reason the villagers, including myself, were threatened and beaten. The Karen soldiers also sometimes requested us to provide supplies. I was sometimes disappointed being a village chief as I was faced with many difficulties. But on the other hand, it was expected that I serve for the wellbeing of my community. Therefore I wanted to serve.

My family did not encourage me to become a village chief as they predicted the risks. However, the villagers are pleased by my leadership because

I actively fight for them. In addition, as I can speak the Burmese language, I can communicate well with the SPDC. Even though I am a village chief I was forced to serve as a porter. Whenever villagers served as porters they were regularly beaten by SPDC.

The SPDC claimed they had to reconstruct the school and for this matter they ordered villagers to pay for it. I had to collect the money from the villagers and deliver it. As village chief I had to attend meetings hosted by the SPDC. Sometimes the meetings take place in my village and sometimes I have to attend the meetings in a village eight miles away. I am troubled by being a village chief because the village situation is unstable and people are harassed by the SPDC. I have to take risks and intervene between the SPDC and the community wisely. I was forced to relocate to two villages. At present I am still a village chief.

### **Ma Mya San's Story (Interview 33)**

**Ma Mya San is a 41-year-old Buddhist, Karen woman living in the Dooplaya District. The members of Ma Mya San's village were forced to surrender livestock and pay excessive fines, which put the entire community into financial hardship.**

*“...They were worried about me. I had lifted up all the burdens of the village on my head...”*

I don't remember the date where I started work as the head of the village but the year was when Battalion 549 came. Men were afraid of the SPDC because they were forced into labour and were tortured by the SPDC soldiers. For these reasons men could not be head of the village. I can speak Burmese a little so the villagers asked me to be the head of the village.

As a village chief, my responsibilities were to work for the villagers and to work peacefully in the village. When the SPDC came to the village I worked for them and did whatever they demanded. If they asked me anything I had to answer them. I never saw the Karen troops. I worked only for the sake of my villagers. The SPDC asked for porters from the village while I was the chief. They never asked me to go, except once I was ordered by the SPDC to go to their place.

When I was there I was asked, “Did my soldiers ask 10,000 Kyat from you and if so I will punish them myself”. The one who asked me was Column commanding officer Than Soe. I replied that I was never asked to pay the money. Then he said “Don’t be afraid of me, tell me the truth - I heard it from someone through my walkie-talkie”. I asked our villagers whether they said it or not. If they did I said “Let the big case become small, and the small will be wiped out” .

The villagers told me that the SPDC troops responded by saying they would punish the head of the village by asking for 15,000 Kyat (USD\$15) instead. They threatened that if we failed to pay it then they would return to the village.

I never saw Karen soldiers. My parents didn’t like me to be the head of the village because the responsibility was very heavy. They were worried about me as I had lifted up all the burdens of the village on my head. They asked my uncle to resign and also wanted me to resign from being the village chief. If I resigned, who would go to the SPDC? Nobody would go.

I never wanted to be a porter, but I went once. I was used as a mine sweeper to go in front of them. .At that time I went with two of the villagers. During this period there was nowhere to go. We could not pay if they asked us for taxes. Our villagers were poor and they carried nothing with them. When they asked for 10,000 Kyat (USD\$10) I replied that we could not pay it. But they were forceful so I returned to the rest of the villagers and we shared the debt.

In 2003 I attended a meeting where I needed to walk for one day on foot to get there. I went with two of the villagers and we slept one night on the way. I was not pleased with being village chief. I pitied my villagers who could not do anything. We cannot force those who dare not go. If there is something to do or somewhere to go I worked with the villagers and we cooperated with each other. I was afraid that people would misunderstand me.

Men were village chiefs before me. I was the only woman head and my villagers were always worried about me resigning. Our villagers were forced to relocate once but later they came back to the village. I would like to say that the SPDC never came to the village to do good work. If

they entered the village, they would shoot the villagers' chickens and eat them. The villagers dared not speak up to them. The villagers could no longer keep any animals because they were afraid that the SPDC would destroy or eat all of them.

### **Daw Me Kought's Story (Interview 34)**

**Daw Me Kought is a 41-year-old Buddhist, Karen woman residing in the Thaton District.**

*"...I ran to avoid the bullets and I got lost in the jungle. Another villager also tried to escape...He was killed..."*

I became village chief in 1995 and I was appointed by the villagers after the previous village chief died. When SPDC soldiers arrest villagers I have to release them with my recommendation. Whenever the SPDC demands supplies I have to provide them. Colonel Kyi Htun Win arrested villagers and tied them up. After that he burnt plastic and dropped it on them. The SPDC seriously mistreated villagers. One time they asked me to come out of the house and follow them. I was afraid to follow them and when I went quiet they threatened that the purpose of the village chief is not for putting on show but is to be killed.

When they demand I look for porters I have to complete their requirements otherwise I am afraid to live in the village. The SPDC ordered that if I saw Karen soldiers I would have to report it and I answered that if I saw them I would. When I travelled and came back to the village, the SPDC questioned me about whether I saw Karen soldiers or not. I did see them so I answered that I did. For this matter one soldier raised his hand to beat me so I held it away and nicely I asked him "Son, did you come here to kill and mistreat civilians or to protect civilians?" Then he released me.

Villagers are pleased about my leadership because they appointed me. I have to participate in forced labour. I served as a porter one time and on the way a battle occurred between Karen soldiers and the SPDC soldiers. I ran to avoid the bullets and I got lost in the jungle. Another villager also tried to escape, but unfortunately a soldier saw him and shot at him. He was killed. The person who killed that villager was Colonel Win Kyi from Battalion 96.

The SPDC do not ask for taxes but demand villagers provide chickens and pigs without excuse. Sometimes if I cannot get them from villagers I have to provide my own raised animals to avoid threats from the SPDC. In addition, they also confiscate my belongings. Even though I have young kids, I still have to meet and serve them whenever I am required. They even confiscated monks' belongings.

I have to attend meetings. In the meetings I was told to deliver messages to Karen soldiers about surrendering to the SPDC and joining hands with them. The journey took me four hours. I went with my friends. I am stressed being village chief and unhappy. Previously the village chief was a man but at present I am still village chief. I have not been relocated to other (villages) and have only resided here.

### **Da Aye May's Story (Interview 35)**

**Da Aye May is a 55-year-old Buddhist, Karen woman who previously lived in the Dooplaya District. During her time as village chief her villagers were subject to torture, beatings, kidnappings, sexual abuse, strict control of movement and the deprivation of medical attention.**

*“...His objective was to rape that woman. The village chief arranged for her escape to the Mon-Karen border and asked her not to return to the village...”*

Villagers here earn their living by doing agriculture. There are 95 households. Some villagers have the potential to make a living, but some are faced with hardship. I am living in hardship and my children are earning their living by doing agriculture for their daily life. School fees are very expensive so I had to borrow 6,700 Kyat (USD\$6.70) from the monastery to enroll my children and pay for their school fees.

In the rainy season SPDC soldiers will come and trouble the villagers. I was asked to provide porters but no villagers have the will to serve the difficult task of walking in the raining season. When villagers could not afford to carry loads they were beaten. Whenever they required me I had to show up and meet them to take the orders. In addition, they provided training almost everyday and I had to go.

When I was asked whether Karen soldiers entered the village, I had to answer that Karen soldiers did not enter the village. I had to deal between the two parties wisely. I had to protect the Karen troops and answered with the best of my knowledge. When Karen soldiers parked at my house I had to ask villagers to watch for Burma Army soldiers and I asked the villagers to come and report (if the SPDC came) while I would hide the Karen soldiers.

If I do not prepare, fighting could occur. I have been faced with difficulties while dealing with the SPDC because when they enter the village they demand food and they confiscate villagers' raised animals and kill them. I have to provide my own food as well as provide food for SPDC soldiers.

One time I was asked to provide two porters to replace the porters that they brought with them and when I got there I was asked to provide one and half baskets of rice. I did not bring any rice, therefore I was faced with trouble and I had to borrow rice from neighbouring villages and reimburse them later.

The SPDC committed human rights violations against villagers in various ways. One time they captured women and kept them at a village overnight. We, the villagers, suffered a lot under their control for many years.

They kidnapped a girl for a day and returned her in the evening. When they came into the village they did whatever they wanted and troubled villagers. Lieutenant Myint Naing, Lieutenant Aung Naing and Tactical Colonel Hla Tun were the worst for mistreating villagers. They demanded that everything was provided for them. Karen soldiers do not mistreat villagers and only the SPDC has threatened us and committed violations.

They arrested young people and shot them with guns. One time, when they hosted a meeting but my attendance was delayed, I was punished. I was asked to give 3 viss (4-8kgs) of chicken as punishment. Villagers were accused of feeding Karen soldiers and got arrested. During interrogation time they covered villagers' faces with cloth, beat them and threw water on them. One villager got so seriously abused that he became too scared to be an ordinary villager and entered into the monkhood.

Without any reason one of the villagers was arrested and seriously beaten, his body was full of injuries. Another village chief was captured and was seriously beaten. He was bleeding, but he was not allowed to access medication. An SPDC soldier slapped a village woman's face for no reason. A villager leader was arrested because they ordered him to look for a gun and he failed to find it. He was seriously beaten with a huge stick. The troops which mistreated the above mentioned villagers (names withheld) were from Battalion 44, but I do not remember the commanding officers' name.

A village chief was ordered to bring a woman who was the wife of a Karen soldier (and who had just given birth to a child fifteen days before) to a military camp. The village chief dared not refuse the order and had no choice. When the woman reached the base, Lieutenant Melone kept her in the house and went for a drink. His objective was to rape that woman. Another soldier knew his officers' behaviour and, as he felt sympathy for that woman, advised her how to escape. She escaped to a nearby village and a boy brought her back to our village. The village chief arranged for her escape to the Mon-Karen border for her safety and asked her not to return to the village.

Most villagers were pleased by my leadership, but maybe some were not. I did not have problem with the villagers. My family did not blame me for being village chief. Even when I was village chief I had to participate and serve as a porter. When we were going to a place where other villagers dared not go, I had to go with no excuses. Each time, up to ten villagers were required to serve as porters. In the year 2000, villagers had to routinely serve as porters almost every day.

Previously, the SPDC required villagers to pay tax of rice income. The quota was a hundred packs of rice but villagers could only afford thirty packs. Villagers here have different backgrounds and some were hardly surviving. They could not complete the quota order by the SPDC.

I had to attend meetings hosted by the SPDC but I was unable to address any issues. The meeting outcome was to hear their orders. The meetings took place in the SPDC's military camp. The village secretary accompanied me to the meetings and it took us one hour to walk there.

I was happy being a village chief because I looked forward to serving for the wellbeing of community. But sometimes, if I could not get villagers to participate or complete the orders from the SPDC, I felt disappointed. I was the only woman village chief. I am getting old now therefore I resigned. I was not forced to relocate.

Villagers are not allowed to park overnight outside the village and all villagers must be at home by nightfall. They are not allowed to go out or sleep away overnight. If a villager needs to be away overnight for business they must request an authorised document issued by Lieutenant Hla Than, Lieutenant Ye Htun and Tactical Colonel Hla Htun.

### **Daw Tin Mya's Story (Interview 36)**

**Daw Tin Mya is a 40-year-old Buddhist, Karen woman who currently resides in the Dooplaya District.**

*“I was told: “When we ask you, the Karen people a question, we only got the answers ‘NO’ or ‘I have no idea’. Therefore we have to beat you.”*

I started to serve as village chief in 1997. I was appointed because men were afraid of serving as leadership in the village because when Burma Army soldiers were patrolling they came and questioned the community about the situation of the Karen soldiers. Villagers were not good with the Burmese language and could not speak to them well. Because of this, villagers were beaten by SPDC soldiers.

One time when an old man saw SPDC soldiers were beating villagers, he ran away from the incident and SPDC soldiers shot at him. Mostly, when the SPDC entered the village, men would escape. Therefore women were required to hear the orders. Men avoided becoming village chief and appointed women to serve. Four women were appointed as village chief. As village chief I was required to look for porters and provide them to SPDC troops. The SPDC demanded a quota of porters which I could not provide as the men had all escaped into hiding. In addition, the SPDC demanded that we provide them with alcohol and food, and deliver it to them.

When men were on service as porters, women had to work for the family to survive. I was in a difficult situation while dealing with the SPDC troops. When I was required to meet them I had to show up on time without delay, whether it was day time or night time. If I was delayed or failed to meet them I was threatened. One time they ordered me to look for women staff (to work in the village like teachers, or in village health) and that they must be girls or women. For this reason the community parents or men would not agree, therefore I had to wisely plead to them that I could not find anyone.

When they got information that Karen soldiers had entered the village they questioned villagers. When the villagers answered that they had no idea, they were beaten. In 1997, eight boys and four girls were captured and beaten badly by the SPDC. I intervened and asked SPDC soldiers about the reasons why they were being beaten. I was told that “When we ask you, the Karen people a question, we only got the answers ‘NO’ or ‘I have no idea’. Therefore we have to beat you”.

Villagers are in hardship and sometimes faced with starvation (including me and my family) as a result of SPDC human rights violations. The men always have to hide in the jungle to avoid risking being seen by SPDC. Some of my villagers were serving as porters and got killed by SPDC soldiers. Everyday they hosted meetings and one person from each household had to attend and those who failed to go got beaten. Some villagers gave up and secretly left the village and moved to a safe area. The SPDC also confiscated villagers’ belongings including raised animals.

I was stressed and unhappy because the SPDC troubled villagers. In addition, villagers who do not understand me view me with a negative attitude. When the SPDC confiscated chickens, ducks, and coconuts the villagers complained to me. I accompanied the villagers and we went to complain at the Army Tactical Commander’s office. For this matter the troops were ordered to transfer, and they were not allowed to be based in the village. They got angry and threatened villagers that next time they come they will trouble villagers and shoot villagers.

## Daw Bitin's Story (Interview 41)

Daw Bitin is a Karen, Buddhist woman from the Thaton District. Daw Bitin worked as a village chief for nine years and was forced to provide the SPDC with porters.

*“...If SPDC troops come into the village, they accuse me of communicating with the Karen soldiers and when the Karen troops come in, they also accused me of communicating with the SPDC...”*

I became a village chief in 1990 and it lasted for nine years. I was selected by the villagers and whether I liked it or not, it became my responsibility. As the village chief, I worked for the villagers and the SPDC and I spoke on behalf of the villagers. I was also a witness for the villagers. When the SPDC entered the village I had to arrange for them whatever they wanted. I was not allowed to stay in the village if I could not meet their demands. I had to face many problems. If I asked the villagers to be porters as requested by the military, their faces would change and their eyes became wide with fear.

Sometimes I asked them (the villagers) to travel with me, but they didn't want to follow me. The SPDC asked to change porters every 5 days. If I was late or delayed to change, they charged me. The villagers who went as porters brought food for themselves. When the SPDC asked for leaves (used for roofing materials) and the villagers could not give it, they had to pay money instead. Sometimes they asked for sand to build their gods' statues and the villagers had to walk very far to get it. If there was fighting, the SPDC came back to me and scolded me. They decided to slap my face. If I could not find the porters, they scared me. Sometimes they accused me of having contact with Karen soldiers. If they got some information, they didn't let me breathe and they told me that they will kill me. If they saw the villagers go outside the village, they accused them of taking food to the Karen soldiers and for this reason the villagers were tortured. They poured water through their nose. I gave the guarantee for the villagers who were arrested by the SPDC.

There were many problems and I forget it. When the problems arose, in order to solve it, I lied to them. But if I could not lie, I had to suffer from them. I was frightened and punished by the SPDC. Once I followed the porters (my villagers) to one of the villages. I didn't meet with anyone on the way. When I arrived at the SPDC base, they let me stay for 5 days. They didn't give me any food. When I asked for food, they didn't give me anything. I asked for permission to go back, but they didn't let me. When I informed their regiment commander, Ta Yin Moo, they let me go.

There was one night the SPDC troops came to my house and kicked my door and asked me to come down from my house. I lit the candle and went down. But they told me not to light the candle. They didn't like it when I lit the candle and they blew the candle out. They made me stay in the dark. Then they asked me, "Did the Karen soldiers enter into the village?" They asked me to tell the truth otherwise they would slap my face. I replied "I don't know", and then they didn't do anything to me.

They asked me to go to the Battalion Commander at night in the dark. I did not dare to go. They forced me to go and so I went. When I arrived there I didn't see anybody. When they asked me to go to the Battalion Commander they entered into the village. I did not see anybody so I went back. When I got back to my village, again they asked me to go to another village. I faced many problems on the way. The one who asked me to go was Lieutenant Aung Htoo.

I was afraid but I could not say much. I wanted to resign from this job, but the villagers would not let me resign. I decided to escape to another place. The villagers appreciated me being village chief. My family also liked it. My villagers could not face the hardship of the SPDC and so they asked me to be village chief. There were no problems among the villagers and my family. When I was village chief I was asked to be a porter and the SPDC ordered me to carry rice, tin milk, and leaves. We had to carry them to another village. I didn't see the SPDC beat my villagers while they were porters. They were tortured behind my back.

The SPDC collected tax from the villagers such as 1,000 sheets of leaf, and 40,000 Kyat (USD\$40). So for a family they had to pay 5 to 10 sheets of leaves, and 500 Kyat per house for a year. Sometimes I had to attend the meetings in other villages. It took about three and half hours and I went

with other villagers. There was no pleasure for me to be village chief because I was afraid of the SPDC.

If SPDC troops come into the village, they accused me of communicating with the Karen soldiers and when the Karen troops come in, they also accused me of communicating with the SPDC. And so I didn't want to be a leader of it. I decided myself that I never wanted to be a village chief again.

### **Naw Ta Thu Po's Story (Interview 49)**

Naw Ta Thu Po is a Pwo Karen, Buddhist woman from Dooplaya District. She was a village chief for two years. Her husband was physically abused and tortured by SPDC. In the end he had to flee from the village. Women in the village lived in fear of SPDC and were raped by them. Naw Ta Thu Po had to borrow money from other people in order to meet SPDC demands. She was in so much debt she had to run away from her village.

*"...The previous female village chief was forced to sleep with the SPDC. Two other women were also forced to sleep with SPDC because they were too scared of them..."*

I worked as a village chief in 1997 and it lasted for 2 years. I worked as a village chief because I had no food and could not pay tax and porter charges. Another reason is there were no men that dare to work as village chiefs. I had my vice secretary.

My duties as village chief were to send porters and two security informants everyday. If the SPDC ordered timber, bamboo, leaves, firewood and wall of bamboo matting I had to send it to them. We also built bamboo-trestles for growing ground plants, planted some plants after clearing the ground and watered the plants every day in their farms. Everyone has to work for them (SPDC), even our parents.

When they are planning to go to battle, we have to send ducks, chickens, pigs, and goats from our villages ten times per month. Even after we have sent it to them, they still come into the village and we have to prepare food for them to eat. Some soldiers never ask us to give it to them; they

will just rob us of our chickens and ducks. If the villagers complain, they will bring them back. We also have to clean their rubber tree plantations.

I had to work with SPDC so the villagers can live peacefully. If the SPDC arrested the villagers, I had to go and pledge for their release. Karen soldiers understand why I have to work with the SPDC.

One day my husband went to our farm with a knife and bamboo basket without wearing a shirt. The SPDC thought that he was a Karen soldier and they arrested him. They beat him up a lot; they tied him up with string, beat him with the gun head, and kicked him with their shoes. As a result he could not control his bodily functions. He was detained for 3 nights. He ran away from there but was arrested again. I sent some pork and beef to the SPDC and they released him; otherwise they would have killed him.

If they wanted porters, I had to look for them with my baby for one or two days before I could go back to my house. At night the SPDC asked me to look for girls because they wanted to sleep with girls. I told them there weren't any girls so they fined me 5,000 Kyat (USD\$5). The previous female village chief was forced to sleep with the SPDC. If we did not sleep with them we cannot control them (we would not know what they will do to us). Two other sisters were forced to sleep with SPDC because they were too scared of them.

When there was a battle, I had to go to the front because I was the village chief. If the SPDC know that Karen soldiers came into our village they will accuse us of being connected with them. They (SPDC) asked for pigs from us as a fine.

I was faced with a lot of problems while working as a village chief. My husband was arrested two times by the SPDC. In the end he dared not stay in the village and hid in another place - I was in trouble after he left me. If I could not send porters, they detained me. When the porters arrived then they released me.

I was in debt while working as village chief because I made a temporary payment on behalf of the villagers. I borrowed money from other people that I could not pay back, so I ran from my village during the night without anyone noticing. I have 6 children but I could not bring all of

them - I could only bring 4 with me. I later asked some other people to bring the rest of my children to me.

SPDC demanded money to build a pagoda but they did not build it. The villagers were forced to repair the road and also give them money. They (SPDC) spent all the money which the villagers gave. When they came into the village, they stole things such as food containers, plates, even longyis . They also drank alcohol and when there was a battle they would use villagers as covers.

SPDC threatened some old ladies that they saw on the road; they asked the old ladies to give them a massage. The old ladies were scared of them and could not control their bodily functions; they could not solve the problems that they were faced with.

I was asked to go for an appointment but I was late so they fined me 30 viss (48kgs) of beef. That battalion is Battery 3, Battalion 1, led by Lieutenant Myint Kyin.

My family members did not encourage me to work as village chief. My siblings did not want me to work as village chief and my husband ran away across the border. When I worked as village chief, I went for volunteer work every day. Even women were forced to be porters; the weight of the load is over 10 or over 20 viss (16 kgs or 32kgs) for 2, 3 days. SPDC are cruel men until they died. They did not provide enough food. Some porters worked for 3, 4 months and were not released and at last they died on the road.

We were forced to give 3 baskets of paddy (about 12.5 kgs) per acre to the SPDC as a tax. Even if the result of the paddy is bad we still have to give them all of it. If we gain 100, we have to give 10. If we sell one bushel of paddy for 500 Kyat, we must give the full amount of one bushel of paddy to the SPDC.

I was not happy to be a village chief. Even if I was not happy to go to a place I still had to go. Before me, there were 4 other women village chiefs. They also faced the same problems as me. In the end they couldn't do it anymore so they ran away from the village.

When the SPDC asked for money I had to borrow from other people with interest, as a temporary payment on behalf of the villagers. I was in

debt and when I could not return the money, I ran away from the village. I had more than 300,000 Kyat (USD\$300) of debt. I ran secretly from the village across the border with my cousin.

## **Naw Pee Sit's Story (Interview 50)**

**Naw Pee Sit is a Karen, Buddhist woman from Dooplaya District. SPDC troops tortured and murdered villagers because they tried to stand up to them). Naw Pee Sit herself had been tortured by SPDC.**

*“...Some of the villagers were arrested whilst working on their farms, they were tied up, crucified and finally, had their throats cut...”*

I have been working as village chief for many years because the villagers like me. The men are scared to work as village chief therefore I had to work.

When SPDC came into the village, the villagers had to arrange food and transportation for them. I have to discuss with the villagers and see their reactions. Sometimes Karen soldiers would come into the village but DKBA has never been to our village. I have to look for security person for SPDC. If they (SPDC) called a meeting, I have to go. If the meeting is at midnight I still have to go. Karen soldiers never called a meeting in the night. If the SPDC calls in the day time, we have to go and stand in the day time, if they call in the night time we have to go and stand in the night time. But the Karen soldiers occasionally came in the village but never called a meeting.

While I was working with SPDC, I had to face many difficulties and problems. But there are no difficulties or problems working with Karen soldiers. When the SPDC come into the village, they do as they wish. They find fault with the villagers and they would kill and eat chicken, pig, goat and cows without the permission of the villagers. SPDC soldiers also steal things from the villagers and after that they accuse us of feeding the Karen soldiers but not them. They would tell us that they have lost their guns and make us look for them even though they haven't lost their guns. They also accused the villagers of having Karen soldiers' guns, but we told them that their guns will be with them, not with us, but they do not believe us. I could not find the lost gun and so I told them to kill me,

but they did not kill me. They threatened that if we could not find the guns they will set fire to our houses. We told them if they want to set fire to our houses they can do it.

Because we talked like that to the SPDC they called the villagers and beat them up. And also stepped on them and dipped them in the water, sliced their throat and stabbed them with a knife. They tied one of the villagers up with strings and made him 'moo' like a cow. One of the villagers was dipped and stepped on. Some of the villagers were arrested whilst working on their farms, they were tied up, crucified and finally, had their throats cut. When the SPDC called me I went there and they told me to bring new people so that they will release the others. When the new people were sent they were also beaten up in the village. They threatened the villagers that if they ran away and were arrested they will receive far worse treatment, therefore nobody ran away. There is no reason for this treatment. The SPDC asked the villagers 'where are the Karen soldiers?' and they said that they do not know. Because they don't know; they were beaten up and later released.

I was also beaten up and questioned. They accused me of having connections with Karen soldiers and that I let the Karen soldiers shoot the SPDC. Later they asked me to look for the Karen soldiers; they told me that if I could not find them we have to move to another place. Otherwise they will kill us and also all the monks - that's why we were forced to move to another village. Some also moved to another village where their relatives stayed. It was in the year 2000 and the Battalion number is 353.

The villagers liked me as a village chief therefore they elected me. They think that I can work even if there are difficulties. My family members also like me to work as village chief because they think that I can talk to the SPDC and it gives them comfort, therefore they let me do this work.

I do not go for porter and volunteer work, only the villagers go but I have to take them there. I do not carry the loads personally but I have to go with them because if they die, I must die too. If I give the villagers, they do not beat them. If not, they will beat them. Even if the due date is completed, if they did not release the old porters I have to substitute them with new villagers.

There is no collection of taxes; instead they keep asking for food. If they ask for chicken, we have to give chicken. If they ask for pigs, we have to give pigs. If they order alcohol, we have to send it because we are scared of them. They promise to pay for the price of the pig but they never do. I have to collect from house to house and give the price of the pig back to the owner but the owner can never get the full payment back.

I do not remember about the meetings (with SPDC). We have never been included in decision making in the meeting, not even once. The meetings include discussions about Karen soldiers and porters. There are two or three villages close to us that have to attend the meeting. The meetings are held in our village so the other villagers came to our village to attend the meeting. Whenever I was called for the meeting I sent my son on my behalf.

I am not happy working as village chief but I still have to do it. If there is peace and harmony then I will be happy all the time. I have been slapped in my face, beaten up, shouted at, threatened and I feel scared all of the time. But the village chief is the core of the village that must stay hard.

There was no female village chief before me; there were only male village heads. I am the only female village chief. My villagers and I would go together whenever we need to go anywhere. Sometimes if I am not free they will go for me, but mostly in the night time we would go together.

When the SPDC drove us from our village we have to go and stay at someone else's village. I was elected as female chief village because there was no one else to do it.

### **Naw Mae Thu's Story (Interview 51)**

**Naw Mae Thu is a Karen, Buddhist woman from Thaton District. Naw Mae Thu was forced to serve as a porter for SPDC.**

*"...The SPDC would torture the villagers by setting them alight with fire ball, pouring water into their nose, and throwing stones at their chest...."*

I started to work as village chief in early December, 2005. The villagers elected and urged me to be a village chief. As a village chief I have to work

for the villagers, the DKBA, and for the SPDC. I had to deal with all the problems that my village was facing by myself. I even had to go and sleep on the main road as a night guide for the SPDC to come into the village. After they came into the village, they arrested one of the villagers, and asked him to lead them to the secret place where Karen soldiers hid the weapons. When he couldn't show them, they threatened him and put a rifle in his mouth. As he is my villager, even though I was afraid, I had to go and plead for them to release him. He was also afraid that he would be beheaded by the SPDC.

When the SPDC came into the village, they would force all the husbands to work as porters for them. When they called for porters, they said it would take only one day but in reality it always took 5 or 6 days. When the husbands didn't come home on time, all the wives would come and trouble me. They kept coming and asking me to go and look for their husbands. I was accountable for all the problems if I didn't go look for their husbands and bring them home.

If any villagers were out of the village to look for food, the SPDC would arrest them when they see them on the road. They would torture the villagers. If the SPDC didn't let them go the other villagers would come to me and I had to go and plead for their release. I didn't just go and ask the SPDC to let my villagers go, but I had to bail them out. I had to give the SPDC what they requested and then they let the villagers go. For the DKBA, there were issues that they tortured and hurt the villagers, but I don't remember so I don't know how to explain it.

If I was faced with any difficulties and I had to lie, then I lied. Furthermore, I had to try as hard as I can to fulfill whatever the SPDC required. Sometimes, I had to show that I am on their side and discuss what they required with them and then give them what they asked for. The Karen soldiers have never accused, hit and threatened us.

The villagers like me and chose me to be a village chief. My family also agreed with it and there was no problem between them and me. Even though I am a village chief I also had to serve as porter myself. I had to carry the SPDC rations such as rice, oil, milk, and sugar from our village to other villages. We could carry the loads with the cart halfway and carry by people the rest of the way to the SPDC camp base. We had to carry the load for them with 50 carts. While we were on our way a battle

occurred in a village before dawn. Everyone had to stay still in the cart and no one was allowed to step out. The SPDC didn't allow any men to go anywhere. Land mines were planted around us. We had to stay there for 5 days and then they let us go.

While we were serving as porters for them, they told us if anyone wanted to go home they would kill us all. If the SPDC think that the porters didn't work hard enough, they would torture the porters. If they see any villagers on the way, they would ask them to show them where the Karen soldiers are and ask them to find weapons. If the villagers could not find any weapons, they would be tortured. The SPDC would torture the villagers by setting them alight with fire ball, pouring water into their nose, and throwing stones at their chest. These are the worst torture that our villagers have to suffer from.

The SPDC didn't collect tax in our village, but once every year they asked the villagers (every household) for thatches, teak poles and bamboos. The SPDC asked our village for 2,000 thatches. I had to calculate the quantity of thatches and the number of houses. I had to ask each house to give 10 thatches each. If we could not reach that quantity then I had to give extra.

As a village chief I also had to go for meetings. The meeting places were usually in neighbouring villages. It took me 3 hours to get there. The meetings are usually held during the day time. I also took one villager with me when I go for meetings. In the meetings, the village chiefs are never involved in decision making. The meeting issues were always about "Lot Ah Pay", a term used by SPDC in reference to forced labour.

I don't like being a village chief. I am very scared of the SPDC coming to the village. I am afraid that if they come they will torture or kill me. I don't like working as a village chief for that reason. The SPDC said "the village chiefs are not chosen for show but for them (the SPDC) to kill." That is why I don't want to work as a village chief anymore.

Some of the village chiefs for this village are women, but I didn't remember their names. They were all smart and they didn't leave any trouble for us.

I used to live and move from village to village. Currently, in our village, I am the village chief. I don't want to keep working as the village chief anymore. It is not fun working for the SPDC. I am fed up with it, it is enough for me. I want to take a break and I decided to stop being a village chief.

## Naw Htu Pit's Story (Interview 57)

Naw Htu Pit is a Pwo Karen, Buddhist woman from the Pa-an District. The troops that she encountered at her village tortured, raped, and murdered villagers. Villagers were forced to be porters and some did not make it back to their village.

*“...The porters that the Burma Army killed had to dig their own hole to die. Before they killed people they sliced their flesh with a knife and poured salt on it. They tortured them until they felt it was enough and killed them in an awful way...”*

I served as village chief for two years from 1980 until 1982. My father was a former village chief, but he didn't dare to serve as village chief so I replaced him. The Burma Army was very abusive during that time. They arrested men and tortured them by pouring water into their noses. They would beat them and kill them. That is why men did not dare to serve as village chief.

Most of the village chief duties were to take care of and look after the village. I had to look for porters and summer workers for the Burma Army and dig a trench to cover the military camp. We had to guard the streets and send messages for them so two people from each section would have to go. If there were ten sections, 20 people had to go.

At night time we had to send rice and some food for Karen soldiers. When Karen soldiers are in the village it really benefits the village, and it was a big relief. I have to look for porters, food, chicken, and pigs for them. The Burma Army raped pigs and it was very disgusting and horrible. They raped a lot of women and those women were very ashamed and dare not stay at the village. So a lot of them followed the troops and they went and stayed with the Burma Army soldiers.

They raped women and then left them pregnant. Those women could not go anywhere and do anything and they were lost in their life. They also raped a married woman in front of her husband but the husband did not dare to say anything. The soldiers that raped the women were Hlaing Bweh Battalion 28 Captain Tun Oo and his soldiers.

For the villagers to have a peaceful life and prosperity in our village I have to work together with villagers. If the Burma Army arrested the villagers I had to go and plead for their release. If they arrested women I substituted them with men so that women did not have to serve as porters. To substitute people we had to give money and guarantee them. It was like we had to give money and buy the women back.

If the Burma Army saw men they just assumed that they were their enemy. The men did not dare to stay in the village - they avoided the troops and stayed away from them. If the Burma Army came into the village and could not see any men they would arrest women and force them to be porters. Most of the women porters had to carry food and sugar of 20 viss (32 kg).

The distance they had to go was about ten miles (16 km). I myself also had to be their porter and carry things for them. I had a baby but I could not breastfeed my child because I had to be a porter. On the way back it rained heavily and there was flooding. Some people drowned from the flooding. My uncle also drowned. He left behind a 14-year-old son.

One villager was a porter for the Burma Army until he could not carry the load anymore and they kicked him until he died and left him beside the road. The Burma Army forced me to give them women. There were three women who came to me and asked for my help so I hid them. I was a village chief so I had to sleep with them. I had to sleep with Burma Army troops as their wife and dared not speak to them a lot. I had to speak politely to them so they liked it.

The reason I stopped being a village chief was Captain Myint San from Battalion 108 liked me and forced me to like him so I left the village. I was raped, now I do not want to talk about it and let other people know about it. My sons are older now so I am worried that they will feel ashamed of me. I went secretly to the farm to give some rice to a girl and the Burma Army soldiers saw me so they raped that girl. She was only about 14 years old. The perpetrator was Captain Tun Oo from Battalion 28.

One of the villagers who went to reap the rice paddy was gang raped by Captain Tun Oo and his soldiers. This woman is 22 years old and is single. The perpetrator was Captain Tun Oo who is 28 years old from Battalion 28. The SPDC troops told me

'I will show you that I can destroy your entire Karen ethnic group until your nationality disappears. If you want to see Karen ethnic people go and look in the museum. If possible, I will do it until you all have no roots and I will show you that!'

If they see pretty single women or married women by themselves they would rape them, there were many cases like that. If Burma Army see men they brutally beat them and killed them. My cousin, who was 18 years old and was a cow herder, was arrested by the SPDC on the farm and they stabbed him 7 times with a knife until he died.

Most of the women village chiefs were raped by Burma Army troops. They did not care whether they were single or married women. When I was village chief and was forced to be a porter, they tied me up with ropes at night and pulled me from this side to the other side. I could not endure the torture anymore and they raped me.

A difficulty that I was faced with was paying 500 Kyat for one man's porter fee for a month. They also took the villagers' rice paddy so the villagers would starve to death. They surrounded the villagers' houses because they thought that villagers were in contact with Karen soldiers. In reality the villagers did not have any contact. The Burma Army troops just assumed things and did things as they wanted. So my husband dared not come back to the village. So I was just left with my child in the village. The Burma Army troops that were active in our area were Battalion 28 and Battalion 108. The worse troops were Battalion 28, led by Captain Tun Oo.

There were a lot of problems but I dared not solve them. They threatened me and pointed guns at me. If there was any news I had to inform the Burma Army military camp and two people from a section had to go and sleep at their camp. I also worked with one of my villagers who was village chief secretary.

During the time when I was village chief, there was one man and three women and we had to work collectively. When I served as village chief, the villagers encouraged me a lot but not my husband. I quarreled with him every day. If Burma Army troops called for porters, I had to go and if they called for summer work, I had to go.

I often had to send messages for the Burma Army troops by myself. Every time the Burma Army called for porters, it included women. You can see the shoulders of the people who were used as porters, it is all swollen. If they could not walk they were beaten and kicked. If people got sick during that time other porters would look after them. People died because they did not have enough food and when you are thirsty there was no water. People had to drink their own urine.

The porters that the Burma Army killed had to dig their own hole to die. Before they killed people, they sliced their flesh with a knife and poured salt on it. They would brutally torture them until they felt it was enough and killed them in an awful way.

People had to pay tax to the Burma Army. For each acre of farm they gave ten tins of rice paddy. Whether your farm produced good or bad rice paddy you still had to give the same amount. If people did not have enough rice paddy, they had to borrow it until it reached 10 tins of rice paddy. There were three levels of paying taxes.

The family that earned good income had to pay 500 Kyat a month; for a family that had normal income they had to pay 300 Kyat for one month. If the house was really poor they had to pay 150 Kyat for one month. All of these we had to pay regularly every month. If we were going to collect taxes we had to call meetings and explain it. The Burma Army gave an order that every villager must give taxes and there was no choice.

If Burma Army troops called meetings it was about porters and tax collection. In the meeting we have no authority to make decisions. They will make decisions as their wish. I had to walk for about one hour to go to the meeting place. The meeting started at 9am in the morning until 4pm in the evening.

I was not happy to be a village chief; the one relief is that I did not have to pay the taxes. I was the first woman village chief in my village. Before me my father was a village chief. After me 2 other women served as village chief. The problems that they experienced were the same as me. Because the Burma Army forced us to leave, the whole of our village had to move to another village. There is a new woman village chief now.

There were conflicts amongst our villagers and the villagers were separated so I stopped serving as village chief. There were over 400 households and we all had to move. If the villagers did not move they shot people and burnt down the houses. There were around 100 households that were burnt down.

My father was the one who was looking for ways to go to another place. My father contacted me so I left my village. I stayed overnight at a village for three days. Then I lived in a different village for 18 years and later I went to stay in another place

### **Naw Maw Lay's Story (Interview 63)**

**Naw Maw Lay is a Karen, Buddhist woman from the Pa-an District. She was village chief for six years. Naw Maw Lay and the people from her village were tortured, beaten and threatened by the Burma Army and forced to work for them.**

*“...They tortured me and put me in an old well. They didn't give me enough food. They didn't let me go anywhere. I had to sleep, eat and stay in that old well for a week...”*

I was village chief in my village. I started work in 1987 and worked for my village for six years. In my village, we always had to be afraid of the Burma Army. The men especially, if they were village chief, they had to be very afraid of the Burma Army. If the Burma Army came to the village, they tortured and beat men as they wanted. The men didn't want to be village chief. They asked women to represent them and become village chief. The women had to take on the duty, and women routinely became village chief.

If the Burma Army came to our village they asked the head of village to find food for them. Sometimes they asked the villagers to work for them and to provide security. I always had to feed the Burma Army and give them meals every week. We had to keep one villager to communicate and share information between the Burma Army and the village chief. I also had one villager to help me. We also had to work for Karen soldiers.

We had to show them the way and guide them once every three days. If the Burma Army was active near to our village, we had to send news and give information on time. So that our village would be peaceful and not threatened by the Burma Army, we always had to provide and give food. We had to stand and work between Karen soldiers and the Burma Army. It was not easy for me. They always asked villagers to work for them. Sometimes the villagers didn't want to work for them. The problem that I faced was that I had to explain to the villagers, to understand that it was essential to provide the Burma Army with food.

The problem that we faced the most was being forced to work for the Burma Army and not have time to eat food. If the Burma Army called me during the night, I had to go. I couldn't refuse them. Sometimes it was raining so I had to be careful for my health. If they knew Karen soldiers killed their soldiers, they were very angry and riots broke out in our village. They accused villagers of contact with Karen soldiers, and if they saw a villager outside the village they didn't ask anything and killed that person directly. Sometimes the villagers were very angry with me. They said that I didn't advocate for them whenever they were killed or forced to work by Burma Army.

I have a beautiful cousin. When she went to the forest to collect vegetables, a Burma Army soldier saw her and talked to her about love. She refused it and didn't give her love for the Burma Army soldier. After that, the Burma Army soldier tried to rape her and threatened her with a gun. She tried to protect herself until she escaped, but because the Burma Army used violence and tortured her - she was badly hurt and suffered a lot of pain.

As I was village chief, sometimes the Burma Army soldiers sent people to call me and pick me up. Before they came and called me, the soldier gave him one bullet for me. They didn't trust me so they always kept one bullet to kill me. The Burma Army soldier always threatened me and accused me of communicating with the Karen soldiers. They always told me to tell the truth. If I didn't tell the truth they would shout at me and threatened to kill me. Once, there was fighting in my village between Karen soldiers and the Burma Army. At that time, nine Burma Army soldiers died. After fighting, the Burma Army entered my village and deliberately killed villagers. This made the villagers very afraid and they decided to leave the village. I decided to follow them. In my village there used to be one hundred and fifty houses but now there are only three or four houses.

In my life I have seen and faced many problems but I couldn't solve them. When I was the village chief, the Burma Army always threatened me and gave me punishments. They always told me that I communicated with the Karen soldiers. They said that all of the villagers were relatives of Karen soldiers, so they wanted to kill the entire village. After the fighting when nine Burma Army soldiers died, they gave me a punishment. They tortured me and put me in an old well. They didn't give me enough food. They didn't let me go anywhere. I had to sleep, eat and stay in that old well for a week. They let me out because one of the elders in my village begged them and gave them pigs and some food. The captain who tortured me was Bo Maung Aye, Regiment Infantry Battalion 44, Company 5.

When I was the village chief, the villagers liked me very much. Because I was chief, some of the Karen leaders were worried about me. My family didn't want me to be village chief, because the job was so demanding that I couldn't do anything else. Some Karen soldiers told me to stop the job, but because I loved my people and my villagers, I kept the job.

They accused villagers of contact with Karen soldiers and they killed villagers. If they saw villagers carrying a bag of rice they didn't ask any questions but killed them directly. They thought that villagers were communicating with Karen soldiers. In my village, the Burma Army never forced us to pay tax, but whenever they came to the village they asked for food and we had to do everything that they wanted. For Karen soldiers we had to pay tax sometimes. We also had to give one tin of rice each year. We could give money if we didn't have rice.

If the Burma Army had a meeting in their place they always invited me. Sometimes they had meetings in my village. When they had a meeting they didn't want us to make contact with Karen soldiers. If they knew villagers had communicated with Karen soldiers, they killed the villager immediately. In a meeting I didn't have any power to make decisions or talk. Sometimes Karen soldiers had a meeting too. They also invited me. But I always let a villager represent me. If Karen soldiers had a meeting they asked the situation of our village, sometimes they asked for food from us. They never tortured us or gave us punishment.

I was not happy being the village chief. I always had to be afraid of the Burma Army. It was my duty and my job so I did it. Before I became the village chief, the previous chief didn't face the same problems as me.

She couldn't speak Burmese and didn't care about anything. When I was village chief I never thought to leave my village but when the Burma Army activity increased and the villagers had to move to another place, I followed them. I moved to another village, where I lived for a while, met my partner and got married. My husband is a Karen soldier. I don't know who the village chief in my village is now. If I lived in my village, I wouldn't want to continue the job of village chief any more. I was afraid the Burma Army would abuse me, because I was a woman and also single.

After I married my husband, I never went back to my village. I was so afraid of the Burma Army because I had married a Karen soldier. If I still lived in my village I would have to work hard to get food for my family and I would have to pay many taxes - it would not be not easy for me to continue my life there. I decided to cross the border with my family. My husband knew ways to come to another place, so we didn't see any problem in our trip. I had relatives in the other place that could help me. If I compare the situation in my village and that place, they are very different. The situation in that place is better than the situation in my village. We also have safety and security, not like in my village.

### **Naw Tha Pyee's Story (Interview 66)**

Naw Tha Pyee is a Karen, Christian woman from Dooplaya District. She works as a village chief and says that the responsibility of their village has been transferred to the women. Naw Tha Pyee describes how abuses have increased since the SPDC set up an army camp in their village.

*“...In the past three years, six people were killed by the SPDC, including the village leader...they killed them without reason...”*

I work as village chief to develop my village. When the SPDC needs porters, or people to build a camp or roads, I have to find a person for the SPDC. Also I help my villagers to try to manage SPDC oppression.

I have not had much education but the villagers like me and they elected me to be their leader. So I became the village chief. In our village we have five zones and 400 houses. Most villagers work on farms, orchards, and

hillside fields. In the past four years, the SPDC came and built a camp near our village. At that time our villagers were faced with many problems. The SPDC told the villagers to resettle around their camp. Some of the villagers resettled to other villages.

When the villagers went out without permission, the SPDC accused the villagers of communicating with Karen troops, and they kicked and hit the villagers. In the past three years, six people were killed by the SPDC, including the village leader. The SPDC accused them of being connected with Karen soldiers and they killed them without reason. After that, men didn't want responsibility for their village. They transferred responsibility to women.

The SPDC army camp was built in our village had no benefit for the villagers. It only gave our villagers trouble. When the SPDC need porters, they take the villagers - around 30 or 40 at one time. If we carry things for the SPDC, they don't give us drink or food. We start work in the morning until 12:00 and we have our own food. And then we start work again at 1pm to 6pm. If we feel tired and want to take a rest, the SPDC army sentry hits us with a gun. So we are afraid and can't take a rest. The porters include elderly people, who are more than sixty years old. The youngest people are thirteen years old. People who can't porter can hire a person to work for them for 300 Kyat a day. For sentry duty it is 2,000 Kyat (USD\$2) and for forced labour it is 2,000 Kyat (USD\$2).

Sentry duty is a day's work for two people. The two people must go to the camp, carry water and clean for the SPDC army. When they work for the SPDC army they don't get any food or drink. Women also have to go and work for the SPDC army. Each week we give five people to work for the SPDC but sometimes, when the villagers come back from their farm, the SPDC calls them and orders them to work.

The military camp was built in our village but we don't have any security. The SPDC also demands chickens, ducks and pigs and we always have to give them. When we don't give them, they steal them. If we talk to their leader, nothing happens. They made a statement of many rules for our village and if the villagers break the rules they get punished.

On the 23rd of June, 2004 the Karen troops came in and shot at the SPDC army camp. The SPDC called for me and the villagers. They thought

we had a connection with the Karen troops and kicked me two times. I didn't want to see the SPDC army again. If the SPDC army went back to their own country I believe we wouldn't have any troubles.

### **Naw Wee Wee's Story (Interview 68)**

**Naw Wee Wee is a Karen, Buddhist woman from the Pa-an District. As the village chief she tried to protect the villagers from the Burma Army. They were forced to work for the Burma Army and had to give them whatever they asked for at their own expense. Naw Wee Wee was beaten and abused by the soldiers.**

*“...I did not have time to look after my family. Sometimes I did not have time to eat. My husband was afraid to live in the village so he hid in the forest...”*

I was a village chief for nearly two years (1992-1993), because the men were afraid to be village head. The Burma Army asked the village chief to give porters, money and food. If the village chief could not give that then he was hit by Burma Army and they also put him in jail. No man wanted to be a village chief because they were afraid of this problem. So the villagers had an election and I became the village chief.

Because I was the village chief, I had to protect my villagers. If the Burma Army soldiers arrested and accused them of being connected with Karen soldiers, I had to pay money to the soldiers. The Burma Army always demanded porters and forced the villagers to build their military camp - it was forced labour. If the Burma Army asked for something I always had to explain it to the villagers so that the villagers understood. It was difficult for the villagers because they had to give rice, chickens, pigs, alcohol and cigarettes. Every day I had to go to the Burma Army camp and give information about Karen soldiers. The villagers had to water crops three times a day and we also had to give one bag of rice from each house every year.

We were asked to porter every year. If we could not go we had to pay money – 5,000 Kyat (USD\$5) - to the Burma Army. I did not have time to look after my family. Sometimes I did not have time to eat. My husband was afraid to live in the village so he hid in the forest. If the Burma Army

saw the men in the forest, they forced them to carry ammunition, and didn't give them time to take a rest.

When the Burma Army came into my village I always advocated for my villagers. I told them, "My villagers are farmers and are very honest. You take my villagers' profits and use violence against them. You ask so much of the villagers that they do not even have time to work and to look after their family. You are not sympathetic to the villagers; you accuse the villagers of contact with Karen soldiers. If I am in contact with Karen soldiers, you can kill me right now. I do not like you torturing and accusing my villagers of being rebels." One of the soldiers said to me, "Do not say anything. I am not afraid to kill you. Close your mouth or I'll kill you"

It was not the first time the Burma Army threatened me like that. The soldiers beat me with bamboo and slapped my face. I saw stars and I was bleeding from my mouth. There was no chance to go to the doctor. My family did not like my job. My family worried that the soldiers would come to kill me.

Once a year we had to give 50 baskets of paddy (equivalent to 20 tins of rice - one tin of rice is 16kgs) and sold duty-bound rice to them. We got 3 Kyat for 1kg of rice and they got 6,000 Kyat for each house. I had to explain to my villagers, and would say, "Please forgive me but if you do not give them what they need we will face a lot of problems." If the villagers could not give that, they would send the villager to jail. If we wanted to release them, we had to pay money.

Sometimes the Burma Army called meetings but as village chief I did not have the right to decide anything. If they decided something they told me. I was not happy to be the village chief but because I was elected I had to do it. I never moved to another village. I always tried my best but they never accepted me as a good leader. They treated me like an animal so I did not dare to continue my job. I woke up early one morning and left my village.

## Naw See See's Story (Interview 70)

Naw See See is a Karen, Buddhist woman from Thaton District. She was the first woman to be a village chief in her village. As well as being forced to work for the Burma Army, she was beaten and abused by them.

*“...This kind of work is like you dig your own hole for yourself to die...”*

I have served as village chief for about 25 years. I started serving in 1980. I did not want to serve as village chief, but the village chose me, so I have to do it. I am serving as village chief for the SPDC and DKBA. I have to send rice to their place by myself. I always have to look for things that the SPDC want and have to keep them satisfied as much as possible.

If any battle takes place they will just put the blame on me. If they find out that the Karen soldiers came into the village they will yell at me. If they ask me something and I answer them but they do not believe me, they say that I lied to them and they would kick me. They pointed guns at me and hit me and one time, one of my ribs broke. I suffered from it for about one month. My family did not like me to be a village chief but the villagers like it. They chose me to be their village chief and it was good for them because they did not have to do it.

I have to go and porter for the SPDC and they also force villagers to be their porters. We have to carry rice, sugar, milk and chilli. Some villagers said that I just finished my turn and they refused to go. I also have to attend meetings every month. Each time we have two people to go with us. From our village to the other one it takes one day to get there and the meeting is at noontime.

I am not happy being the village chief. This kind of work is like you dig your own hole for yourself to die. It is very dangerous. Before, there were man village chiefs but then later, because of the abuse by the Burma Army, most of the men do not dare to serve as the village chief. That is why my villagers chose me to become village chief. I am the first woman who took up this work and responsibility. I have only lived in this village and never moved to another village.

## Naw Gwet Po's Story (Interview 71)

Naw Gwet Po is a Pwo Karen, Buddhist woman from the Thaton District. As the village chief she was often tortured by the Burma Army. When the Burma Army forced her son to porter for them, they shot him. Naw Gwet Po is 58 years old.

*“...the Burma Army asked my son to carry water for them and while he was on the way they shot him with a gun...”*

I served as village chief from 1992 for three years. The men dare not do it because if something went wrong then the Burma Army would inquire about it and then beat them, so the men were afraid to do it.

The village chief duty is to look for porters when the Burma Army asked and when they asked for chickens and pigs, the village chief would have to look for them. The village chief also has to go to the military camp to send food and letters. They also have to carry packages for Burma Army soldiers. It was very heavy. I had to put one package on my back and another one on my head. Just to send all the packages it took two days to arrive.

If the Burma Army soldiers stole the villagers' chickens, then the villagers would come to me and complain about it. So I went to the Burma Army and asked for money for the chickens to satisfy my villagers. The villagers said that because I was the village chief, I should go and talk to the Burma Army. When I went and asked for the cost of the chickens, sometimes they gave it to me and sometimes they didn't. When they didn't give me the money they beat me, so I was the one who suffered.

If the Burma Army arrested my villagers I had to go and plead for their release. If I didn't go, the villagers were tortured. I had to look for food for the Burma Army troops. Sometimes I could find it but sometimes it was really difficult to find it. If I could not find food for them, they tortured me. If they asked for pig or chicken and I could not find any, they tortured me. If they asked for pig, they asked for a pig that weighed 15kgs and that is what I had to find. I also had to arrange for people to be

the guards on the street and I had to send porters for them. I also had to send messaged for them. I had to do everything that they asked me to do.

Karen soldiers rarely come to the village and ask for food. They never asked people to be their porters. If there were Burma Army troops around then the Karen soldiers would ask us to guide them, to find their way out.

I was a widow with four children so it was really difficult for me. The Burma Army asked my son to carry water for them and while he was on the way they shot him with a gun. I did not have any money to send my son to hospital. As I was a widower, some of the villagers felt pity for me so four of the villagers gave me some money. One gave me 50 Kyat and the other three each one gave me 100 Kyat. I went to the hospital but they did not take care of my son. They did not take the bullet out. After three years when I arrived across the border, the medic and health workers did a minor operation and took the bullet out of my son's leg. I have never forgotten that bad feeling.

The Burma Army came to my house and if they saw two milk tins of rice they would take one whether I gae permission or not. They just took it by themselves and there was nothing I can do. They also came and took the chickens that I raised for my family. As I am a widower, I did not have any farm so I did not earn anything from it. If I looked for food in the morning then perhaps I could eat in the evening.

The Burma Army asked me to follow them for two days and I did not have any thing to eat. They arrested my brother-in-law, forced him to be a porter and tortured him. They tied his hands at the back and swore at him. They burnt him with smoking fire and they heat an iron and burnt him with it. They tortured my brother-in-law until he was throwing up blood. They locked him between 2 pieces of wood so he could not do anything. Until now he cannot speak. As I was the village chief I have to go every day for a week to their military camp. Their camp was based in another village so I had to go there every day to show up until my brother-in-law was released.

If the Burma Army troops arrived at nighttime I had to go and see them. If it was daytime I would also have to go. They threatened me, told me that they would stab me with a knife, and they pointed guns at me. One

time they drank the villager's rum so the villagers asked them for the fee and they said "why do you have to ask for the rum fee?" and they shot the villagers. As I was village chief I had to go to that place. They hit me with a stick and told me that it was not my business, so not to bother. I was also very afraid so I left. Later they said that I was guilty and for the punishment I had to give one and half kilos of chicken. So I had to look for chicken for them. This incident happened in 1992.

The group from Tar Pond camp was responsible for sending all information. The Karen soldiers just asked for food and if we sent it then it was fine. They did not cause trouble to the villagers. My relatives did not like me to serve as village chief, but I did not have any money so I had to do the work that nobody liked to do. When my husband died I was surrounded by a lot of troubles. If I worked in the morning I could eat at night. I had to work for the Burma Army for the whole day and when I came back home there was no rice to cook. My children did not have any food to eat, so I had to go out and look for some rice and come back to cook so we had dinner at night time. Sometimes I had to cook one milk tin of rice and put it with some of the roots of plants and eat. If I cooked like that I could eat for one or two weeks. I could not work to earn any money because I had no time so I just ate like that.

Even when my children were sick I couldn't take care of them. I had to leave them and continue to do work for the Burma Army. When I went to the Burma Army troops' place, my heart was full of worry. It wouldn't be good if I didn't go. They asked me to do things and they were "hotter than fire" (meaning they were dangerous).

I had to porter by myself and I was starving for rice for two days. They tell you that it will take only five days then they keep you for a month. If they said just for a short time it can take a week. They did not give the porters food, so people were starved. If people cannot carry things they hit them. If the porters cannot walk anymore they just beat them to death on the side of the road. When people are porters they have to bring their own food.

We conducted meetings at my village. When I was a village chief, another villager also helped me with all the work. If the Burma Army wanted to have a meeting they held it at our village. We did not have any say in any decisions. Usually the meeting started at 8am in the morning until 2pm.

I was not happy to work as a village chief. I was not free to work to earn some money for my family. I was also very concerned about my children. They did not have enough meals. The villagers also talked behind my back about me. I cannot remember if the previous village chiefs were men or women. Currently I do not have good health so my memory does not work well. I cannot remember the names. In our village the village chief changes every month. All of the village chiefs' experiences are very similar.

If the Burma Army called I have to go. Sometimes it was far way from our village so I had to sleep on my way back to the village. I do not know who the current village chief is. I came and lived here for about 7 years. I could not continue to work as village chief. I ran away because I couldn't suffer from the Burma Army's orders any longer. I came across the border together with my friend's mother. We slept two nights on our way. We came by foot.

### **Naw Chaw Chaw Kyi's Story (Interview 72)**

**Naw Chaw Chaw Kyi is a Karen, Buddhist woman from the Thaton District. She has been threatened and beaten by the Burma Army.**

*“...They pointed guns at me and hit me with the gun until my stomach was swollen. They hit my head with a stick and it cracked open...”*

I became village chief in 1955. I was a village chief for 5 years, because no one else wanted to be and they were afraid of the Burma Army. I became village chief because the villagers selected me. When I was the village chief I had to work for the Burma Army. I had to look for chickens and pigs whenever they requested them. I had to fulfill all their needs.

A problem that I faced with the Burma Army as the village chief was when they arrested my villagers and asked them to dig a hole. Then they put the villagers in the hole and covered them with earth. They covered them with earth but they left the villagers' heads and stomped on them on the ground. Then they took out the villagers and beat them and brutally tortured villagers for a month and after that they killed them.

The Burma Army asked us to search for Karen soldiers. They told me that if I could find them then I was a good person, if you couldn't find them you are not a good person. It was very difficult for me to do it. I couldn't find any Karen soldiers so they beat me and told me that I must not serve as village chief any more. I agreed, as I didn't want to serve as village chief any more.

I had to look and fulfill all the needs that the Burma Army asked me to and if I could not find what they wanted then they swore at me. They hit me and it hurt a lot and they threatened me. They pointed guns at me and hit me with the gun until my stomach was swollen. They hit my head with a stick and it cracked open. They put me in between two planks of wood that they used to torture the villagers and told me "Karen soldiers came and shot us so we punished you for this. Your villagers work for Karen soldiers so you all have to suffer from it and keep it in your mind".

The Burma Army told my daughter to bring them a gun and they would release her mother. I told them that we do not have any guns. When they did not get what they asked for they threw me in a well. Then I told them, "I am a village chief. When you wanted something you asked me, and I did it for you as you liked. When you want to beat me you beat me as you like. This is not a fair system to treat me like this". After I told them that later on they released me. The person who treated me badly and beat me was Infantry Battalion Division 44 Major Ko Ko. This Major was very rude and violent.

My villagers liked me to be their village chief but none of my children want me to serve as village chief. They asked me to stop working as village chief. There was no problem between the villagers and me. When I was a village chief I never had to porter for the Burma Army, but the villagers always had to porter for the Burma Army. Some of the villagers who were porters were tortured and beaten by Burma Army soldiers and their heads were injured so some of them ran away but they arrived back to the village safe and sound.

The Burma Army also charged a tax to the villagers. They had to give them five tins of rice for one farm - they asked for about 150kgs of the rice. Then the Burma Army also kept the villagers' rice with them. If the villagers needed rice to cook they had to go and ask for the rice paddy from the Burma Army troops to pound it, and cook it each time. We had

to find animals for the Burma Army like pigs and chickens, and then I had to look in the village. If I couldn't find it I had to get my own chickens that I raised and give it to them.

If they asked for pigs and if I could not find it in the village I had to take one of my pigs from under my house and give it to them. But the Burma Army said to me "if I ask you for something, you cannot find it. But if Karen soldiers asked you for something you can always find it for them. So if the Burma Army asks you for something, keep in your mind that you have to find it until you get it. Always think about how to get things for us".

I did not attend any meeting when I was village chief. I also didn't have the opportunity to participate or make any decisions. I did not like to be village chief because I was very afraid of the Burma Army. Whenever the Burma Army came into our village, I had to work for them very hard so I did not want to serve as village chief any more. In this village I was the first woman village chief and before me the village chief were all men. There were four women village chiefs in this village including me. I always lived in this village. I have never lived in any other village. Now the current village chief in my village is a woman. I didn't want to continue to work as village chief because the Burma Army beat me and I dared not to continue to do it. Another reason is I am getting old so I did not want to do it. I just want to rest at my home.

### **Naw Chiner Su's Story (Interview 75)**

**Naw Chiner Su is a Karen, Buddhist woman from the Dooplaya District. She served as the village chief for 3 months because none of the men wanted to do it.**

*"...they arrested everyone who came back from the rice farm ...after they finished asking questions they beat everyone and then released them..."*

In 1998, I served as the village chief for three months. At that time it was the time when people have to reap their paddy (harvest time). All the men were afraid and did not want to do it and they asked me to do it. I felt sympathy for my villagers so I accepted that I should do it. The

reason why the men were scared to serve as village chief was the SPDC troops shot one of our villagers and his leg was broken. We tried to treat him but he died. That is why men did not want to serve as village chief so women have to do it.

In my village there were three other people who worked together with me to fulfill the duty of the village chief. The four people were with me all the time for the work. While I served as village chief the SPDC came to the village and asked for chickens and pigs to eat. They also called for porters. As the village chief, you have to face different kinds of things. Sometimes if the SPDC wants porters, you have to look for them. If I go and ask the villagers to be porters they got angry with me. Their children and wives swear at me. If they have to porter for a long time they came and argued with me. The SPDC troops also threatened and swore at me if I could not find any porters for them. I had to do my best to solve all this.

The SPDC Tactical Commander U Khin Maung organized meetings for all village chiefs. If any village did not come they would go and burn it down. Two villages did not come. I was afraid that our village would be burnt down so I went to the meeting. They talked about how much rice each village would have to pay. For the paddy-reaping period, to identify people, the SPDC asked me to give out permission cards for the ones who had to go to their farm. When the villagers went to their farm with the permission cards the soldiers who were waiting on the road tore their cards up and said it was nonsense. They also swore at the villagers and beat them. For the ones who did not have cards, they arrested them and our village chief had to go and plead for their release.

If Karen soldiers come to the village they asked for rice to eat and batteries. I did not know that they had come because I was in my home. When the SPDC heard about it they came and asked me. I did not know so I told them that I didn't know. They went to the village and took people's shops. They arrested everyone who came back from the rice farm and asked them. After they finished asking questions they beat everyone and then released them. That was Captain Maung Myaint in 1997 and 1998.

My husband was a former village chief so every time I had difficulties he would give me advice. I did not want to serve as village chief. I did it because the villagers were in trouble and they asked me to do it. There are

SPDC troops that are good and there are also SPDC troops that are bad. But there are more bad troops than good ones. Those troops will come to the village and arrest villagers and beat them. They follow the villagers so some of the villagers are afraid and run away. Then they shot the ones who ran with their guns. When that happened I went to the Column and told them “Are you coming to our village to fight your enemy or are you fighting the public”

Then he replied that “we come to fight the enemy”. I told them “if you come to fight the enemy, why do you do it like this? It is like you come and attack the public”. They did not come and ask for money. But they came and asked for chicken, pigs, rice, cooking oil and salt for them to eat. When they asked for those kinds of things I would ask the villagers for it.

### **Naw Chu Cha’s Story (Interview 79)**

**Naw Chu Cha is a Pwo Karen, Buddhist from the Pa-an District. She worked as a village chief for one year experiencing and witnessing many atrocities committed by the Burma Army troops.**

*“...Some of the women porters were very young and at night they raped them all... For men if they could not work, they beat them to death...”*

I worked as the village chief for one year in 1994 because the men in the village would not be a chief. Whenever the Burma Army entered the village they would beat and verbally abuse them and so because of this they dared not be a chief. As the village chief I would have to find villagers to work as porters for them (the Burma Army). If the villagers could not go, they let their bullock cart be used to carry things for the Burma Army. If the Burma Army came to the village, we had to supply villagers to work for them. Within a month they would ask for 3 or 4 goats for their meals. They would also take chickens, pigs and other animals from the villagers without permission and they would do it as much as they liked. Sometimes the Burma Army took villagers to their army camp and tortured and punished them. If the villagers were arrested, I had to go there and make a guarantee to have them released. We had to pay 500, 300 and 200 Kyat to release the villagers.

It was not a problem to give chickens, pigs and alcohol to the Karen soldiers if they asked for it. However, the problem was that if they entered the village, there would be trouble from the Burma Army and so we worried that the Karen soldiers would enter the village.

One problem that I had to face was, one time, when my husband went to the forest to cut wood, the Burma Army met him there and arrested him. To release my husband, I had to pay one viss (1.56kgs) of chicken to them. Another time, when they again arrested my husband, they decided to kill him and I had to pay to have him released. Another time the Burma Army thought that one of the villagers was a Karen soldier and so they tortured him brutally until he was bleeding from his mouth and nose. I went there and paid money to release him. This villager was actually an ordinary person but they did this to him because they thought he was a Karen soldier. They also shot to death one of my villagers, as a member of the Karen soldiers. They shot at his ear and his stomach and then all of his insides came out and he died. After that situation, I had to go the army camp all the time. The Burma Army suspected that I let the Karen soldiers come to the village and so they destroyed everything that I had in my house. They also shot at my house with guns, but it did not hit my house, it hit the coconut trees. Once, one of the students came back from the camp when he heard his mother had died. The Burma Army soldiers said that he was a Karen soldier and they shot him while he was worshiping his mother's dead body.

The system was that if the village is too big it means a huge number of people or houses. They divided it into 2 or 3 parts and let a different village chief be in charge in each of the parts. For porters, I had to send five of the villagers each time. One trip for the porters took about 15 days and I went with them every time and went everywhere they went. We never had enough food to eat with just one milk tin of rice to feed 6 people. They let the porters eat once a day - one milk tin of rice we ate over 3 days. I worked there for 3 days and I came back. Among five of the porters, they tortured two of them and later on they killed those same two.

I remember once the military arrested my brother for use as a porter. At that time he had stomach problems and he could not work. However they forced him to work, so I went there and paid 500 Kyat to release him. I had to release 3 of the villagers by paying 3,000 Kyat (USD\$3)

to them. Whenever they entered the village, they always yelled at the villagers and then took everything that they could see and want from the villagers, without asking permission. They took the bullock cart and cow and used them for their work.

Once in a fighting area, they took a lot of porters and all of them were women. Some of the women porters were very young and at night they raped them all. For men if they could not work, they beat them to death. After their captain Maung Nyo died, three of us village chiefs could not sleep in our house and we escaped to other houses to sleep. These Burma Army soldiers were really bad and rude. When they came to the village at night they went to the houses and gave problems to the villagers. If they were single, they raped them. So the young women were always scared to sleep at night. Sometimes the Burma Army soldiers came to our village at night and asked me to go to their army camp. So my husband would pretend that I had leg problems and that I could not walk. If they forced me to go, I would pretend myself by bandaging my legs and went there. If they asked for food we had to send to them in time, otherwise we would be punished. Once there was a food shortage and we, the villagers could only eat boiled rice. How could I solve this problem when the Burma Army soldiers asked the villagers for rice? I knew how the villagers were suffering but I was also afraid of the military. In this situation, I could not solve the problem. I also dared not solve it. The troops that entered into the village were Captain Htay Win from Battalion 28 and Company Commander Maung Nyo. Both of them were really horrible and it was these troops that raped a lot of the women. When the villagers heard that he had died, they felt very joyous and happy.

First my husband was a village chief, but when he could not work, I replaced him. At that time, my baby was only 7 months old and the villagers helped me by feeding my baby with my milk. Before I was a village chief, I never went to porter and just helped them for work. They tortured the porters who could not carry their package. They tied them up and beat them with their guns till they were bleeding.

They demand porters three times per year. If you refused to go you had to pay 50,000 Kyat (USD\$50) and if three times then you had to pay about 150,000 Kyat (USD\$150). They ordered as a tax to all the villagers, five baskets for one acre of farm. However, they also took everything which they saw, whatever they liked, without permission. If the villagers

produced more rice from their farm, then they took more from them. They always asked for porters. Once a week or twice a week they asked. If they asked money for tax, I went back to the villagers and told them if they had money, pay it or if you have rice, pay it. Otherwise if they come by themselves it will be more torture on us and they will take everything from us anyway. The villagers paid it as they were afraid of the military troops.

I never went to meetings because one of the village chiefs went and the place was based in Battalion 28. For me, I reorganized the meeting in the village. I was not happy to be a village chief because it was really a strain for me. There was a woman village chief before me. There were about six of them and they had more problems than me. I don't know who the chief is now but for me I couldn't do it anymore because I was afraid that the military would kill me. I lied to people and have left my village since then.

### **Ma Chehly's Story (Interview 84)**

**Ma Chehly is a Pwo Karen, Buddhist woman in the Dooplaya District. She was threatened by the SPDC and forced to work for them.**

*"...they said that I always want to back up the Karen soldiers and they kicked my house and threatened to kill me..."*

I worked for two months as a village chief although I forget the dates. Even though you don't want to do it, you must do it if it is your turn. I'm not the chief but I am an assistant to the village chief. I had to do everything the village chief ordered me to and attend the meeting instead of the village chief.

If the SPDC demanded food from the chief, then the village chief ordered me to collect it from the villagers and send it to the army camp. We also sent food sometimes to the Karen soldiers when they asked us for it. We sent this secretly so that the SPDC would not know about it. We had to be very careful about information regarding the Karen soldiers and the SPDC so that there would not be fighting between them. Once when I went to the place where the Karen soldiers were, I met with the SPDC

soldiers and they asked me where I had come back from. I was scared when they asked me, but I controlled myself and I lied to them. Then they said that I always want to back up the Karen soldiers and they kicked my house and threatened to kill me.

We were scared when the fighting happened between the Karen soldiers and the SPDC. We were always ordered by the SPDC to work for them and we could not eat or drink as there was no time for us. Sometimes I stopped in my friend's house and asked for food. Sometimes I could not walk. I could not take care of my children when they got sick. Once, my baby got a pain with a lump on her body and later it became a serious case but no one supported me. My child was too small and suffered badly.

Whenever I was faced with problems I thought it was for my villagers and so I kept silent and tried to do good work for them. One of the SPDC soldiers told me that “you, the village chief, were communicating with the Karen soldiers” and so he told me that he would kill me. But they never tortured or punished me. I remember once that the SPDC arrested one of the village chiefs and put them into jail, telling us that she never gave us our complete orders. They also blamed her for supporting and sending information to the Karen soldiers and so they punished her by putting her in jail.

Another problem is that it is really hard to fulfill what the SPDC demands because there is nothing left. The villagers were forced into labour and as porters for the SPDC and there is no time for them to work for their own families. I could not remember the names of those troops. We could not respond to them as they have guns in their hand.

Even though my family didn't like me being the village chief, it was my turn to do it. The villagers liked it however, as I worked for them and talked to the SPDC, defending them. Some of the villagers have suffered a lot because of the ill treatment and rude contact of the SPDC.

I was never a porter but I would have to take the porters to the army camp. The SPDC would torture our villagers when they could not carry the heavy things, or could not walk. I went to the meetings with the head of the village all the time. I never went alone. It was about a three-hour walk. The SPDC warned us not to have contact with the Karen soldiers and not to send food for them. They also made the villagers collect

money for them, to fix their buildings. They called it tax and asked us to send to them all the time. Then they also ordered the villagers to send ten bamboo pieces each, to their army camp. The village chief had to go every day to their camp, whether there was a meeting or not. For tax, the SPDC demanded that the villagers, like those who work with large farms, had to pay five baskets of rice paddy (one basket is equal to 15 kilos).

I was not happy with this work, because all of the women village chiefs had to face many problems and you would feel tired and some got diseases. There were seven women who became a chief of the village. I didn't want to be a chief village because I had to pay the tax, work for the military and there was no rice to eat, so I escaped from my village.

The villagers had to work for their daily life and had no extra food, but they didn't have time to work for themselves and so trying to survive was very difficult. My house was old and I needed to rebuild it but I had no money, and I could not pay the tax, so now I have moved to another place.

### **Naw Goal's Story (Interview 87)**

Naw Goal is a 50-year-old woman from Thaton district. She has given birth to 12 children but only one has survived. Her husband was tortured by the SPDC and died from his injuries. Women and girls were also tortured. Naw Goal left the village when her last remaining son contracted TB.

*"...After he (my husband) died two more of my children also died. I felt so sad and know that I'm not afraid to die so the villagers asked me to be village chief..."*

I have given birth to twelve children but only one is left with me. Eleven of my children died because they were too small. My husband was brutally tortured by the SPDC as they knew he was in contact with the Karen soldiers - this was before I was village chief. Karen soldiers came to the village and asked my husband to be a guard for the village and gave him a gun. He took that gun and buried it.

When the SPDC found out about it, they tortured my husband and he just survived for one year and later on he died. They covered my husband's face with cloth and forced his face into the water, when they let him up they asked, "Where is the gun?" When my husband did not reply, they beat him some more. The village chief at the time guaranteed himself for my husband, and he was released. He suffered from the effects of that torture until he died. We were a poor family, and he could not survive because we had no money to get medical attention. I was left with 3 children. After he died two more of my children also died. I felt so sad and know that I'm not afraid to die so the villagers asked me to be a village chief.

My life as a widow was not good so I was not afraid to die and so I agreed to be a chief. I worked from 1997-2002. Then my son was suffering from tuberculosis and he was sent to a camp hopefully to cure him. I didn't want to work as village chief any more and so I went with my son and stayed with my nephew.

I don't want to be a village chief anymore because the SPDC use women as mine sweepers. They force woman to guard them and walk before them on tracks. When we were working in the fields, they ran quickly to pass through it because they were afraid of landmines. They asked two women to guard them as they walked.

The SPDC tortured villagers during my time as village chief. Two villagers were working on their farm. It was in April 2002. One was 28 and one was 12 years old. Where they were working their farm, the SPDC were ambushed by Karen soldiers. The SPDC said that these women informed the Karen soldiers. Actually they did not know anything about it at all. The Commanding Officer Pay Myo Aung from #1 Battalion, Infantry Battalion Column #4 arrested and tortured them. When the women said they did not know anything, Pay Myo Aung covered their faces with plastic and forced their heads into the water and repeated this many times. When I heard about it I went straight there and brought 3 chickens with me and gave them to him. They took the chickens and released the two women.

The DKBA soldier Captain Moe Kyaw came to our village. When he came the older women were asked to carry water for him, so he could take a bath. If we don't do what he asks he will torture us. One Friday

two of the villagers carried water for them to take a bath. The SPDC were afraid that Karen soldiers would shoot them if they take a shower at the stream. Most of the villages had women as leaders.

### **Nae Dee Nor's Story (Interview 89)**

Nae Dee Nor is 35 years old. She is a Karen, Catholic woman from the Pa-an District. During her time as village chief Nae Dee Nor was beaten and tortured on many occasions when she was not able to supply the full amount of food required by the Burma Army.

*"...They beat me on the chest, then tied me up and beat me with a bamboo stick until the stick broke. I was then shoved into a dark room and left for two days..."*

I started this work in 1988 and continued for one year. At this time the Burma Army were conducting operations nearby and nobody wanted to be village chief. The Burma Army beat and tortured most of the villagers, both men and women. We didn't have any chance to defend ourselves or to attack them back.

The Burma Army gave me orders and I had to come back to the villagers and explain what we needed to do. The villagers understood that they had to co-operate and participate. This is a sign that we are a peaceful people and we understand that our village will be destroyed if we do not work for the Burma Army. The villagers have to be available to work for the Burma Army all the time. Two people have to watch outside the village and gather any information to pass along to the Burma Army. Some villagers are forced to work as porters and they are sometimes away for a month.

If we could not produce enough food for the soldiers in time, they beat and tortured us. So I had to plan carefully to make sure everything was delivered on time. The soldiers asked for chickens, pigs and tobacco. When the Karen soldiers come to the village they were satisfied with whatever we offer them. As they are Karen people we feel happy to support them.

It is not easy to be a village chief. There is not much time left to work for myself, in the farm or for my family. If we could not supply what they

want, they enter the village and arrest villagers. Then these villagers have to follow them and carry the heavy ammunition for them.

The soldiers always wanted to eat meat, pigs, cows and chickens. So when the villagers could not afford it, I paid for them. I too could not pay all the time and then we were faced with problems. I understand all these problems and decided to talk to the Burma Army. But I am expected not to complain about anything. Then the Burma Army just used their power over us and ordered us to do as they tell us. They do not show us any pity.

I was frightened by the Burma Army because they always threatened to kill me. They said, "I will run a knife through you" whenever we could not supply their needs. Once, the Burma Army accused me of working for the Karen soldiers. They started to beat and torture me. They beat me on the chest, then tied me up and beat me with a bamboo stick until the stick broke. I was then shoved into a dark room and left for two days. I felt incredible pain through my whole body, I could not swallow. I could not do anything to help my situation. The Battalion Commander from #44 was responsible.

### **Naw Sun Rise's Story (Interview 91)**

**Naw Sun Rise is 56. She is a Karen Buddhist from the Thaton District. She was village chief for 11 years. Naw Sun Rise was tortured several times and witnessed many of her people beaten and tortured.**

*"...But the DKBA soldiers frightened me badly. They told me they would cut my neck with a knife and kill me, and they scolded me rudely..."*

I became village chief in 1994. I continued in the position for about 11 years. The community appointed me. As a village chief, I worked for the SPDC, DKBA and for the villagers. I had to organize to provide whatever the SPDC ordered. Once I was faced with a huge problem. There was fighting and one of their soldiers was injured. They were really angry and taking it out on the local people. At midnight, soldiers came into our village and demanded that we work as porters. The SPDC did not feed the women porters who went with them. It was raining heavily at

the time, but the villagers carried heavy things for the SPDC. We did not know what had happened to make them be so angry.

Once, a soldier from the DKBA came to my house and asked me to go with them. They pointed a knife at me and forced me to go with him outside the village. He did not let me to bring anyone with me. The DKBA troops insisted that I show them the place where the Karen soldiers are staying. Even though I had to follow them I didn't know where the Karen soldiers were. They left me in a tent outside of the village. A soldier came back to the village and went to all the houses and took all the property. They left only the blankets and mosquito nets. I was very scared out there so I came back to my house.

I could not solve all the problems and suffered for it. The Karen soldiers never beat, tortured or punished me. But the DKBA soldiers frightened me badly. They told me they would cut my neck with a knife and kill me, and they scolded me rudely. The worst one was named Myint Lwin from DKBA.

The villagers liked me being the village head, but my family did not like it. They worried about me all the time because I had to follow the SPDC and DKBA whenever they ordered me day or night. There were no problems between me and my villagers. Once I went for porter duties when I was a village head. I was ordered to carry rice, tinned milk, oil and sugar from one village to another village. I saw the SPDC beat and torture villagers right in front of me. When the villagers could no longer carry their load, they ran away. If they were caught, they were arrested and had their hands tied behind their backs and beaten. When the village chief gave them a chicken, they would release that villager.

Our village did not have to pay tax in cash but were forced to provide food like chicken and pigs - the soldiers never paid for these goods. Having soldiers stationed near the village made everyone very nervous and expecting trouble at any time.

I attended meetings sometimes. I had to walk about 5 hours to those places. The meetings were held in the day time usually. If they were held at night, I went with some of my people.

I was not happy when I was village chief. It was busy all the time and I had no time to work for my family or take care of them.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The evidence presented in this report was documented by members of the Karen Women Organization. They used a qualitative research methodology which used semi structured interviews and narrative data collection. This report was compiled from 2005 to 2009.

A total of 95 cases were compiled, although only 30 are included in full in the report. The women's ages range from 25 to 82. Education ranged from grade 1 to grade 10. They served as village chiefs from one month to 38 years, with an average of nine years. 40 escaped from the village and sought protection as refugees. About one third are still serving as chiefs.

The interviews were conducted in the Karen language and translated into English.

## **SUPPORT OUR WORK!**

The Karen Women Organization needs your support.

Your donation will enable us to empower our women's groups and develop our activities. Your support of the Karen Women Organization is indispensable.

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*“...being a village chief is like walking  
between sharp knives...”*

The practice of electing women as village chiefs has spread through lowland Karen areas of Eastern Burma since the 1980s, as Burma’s military regime has expanded control and increased persecution of these war-torn communities. As village leaders, the women face enormous difficulties dealing with the Burma Army. Despite constant threats, torture, and sexual abuse, women continue to serve as village chiefs for the benefit of their people. This report is a testimony to their courage.

**Karen Women Organization**