



The people of Mutraw and the Salween Peace Park (SPP) are mourning the death of dedicated community leader and Indigenous rights advocate Saw Thet Mee.

Saw Thet Mee was shot and killed by Burma Army soldiers on 31st March 2020 after crossing the military road in Saw Mu Plaw village tract. The Burmese Army uses this road and is attempting to upgrade and extend it. The road expansion and resulting armed conflicts are a major hindrance and threat to the lives of local villagers, especially in the dry season.

A dedicated community and family man

Saw Thet Mee was born in 1970 in Htee Baw Kee Village, in the mountains of Luthaw Township, Mutraw District, Kawthoolei. In 1995, Saw Thet Mee married Naw Yu Mer. However, in 1997 the young couple was forced to abandon their fields in Ler Mu Plaw when the Burma Army constructed the military road through the heart of their farmland.

Saw Thet Mee practiced Indigenous Karen animist traditions. He was a very active community leader; in 2006, he became involved in the movement to protect the Kaw customary land and community forests. He was vice-chair of the Luthaw Hkoh Community Forest committee and an advisor to the Kaw Thay Ghu customary land governance committee. After attending a Salween Peace Park consultation meeting in 2016 he became a staunch advocate for the Salween Peace Park at the local community level.

Saw Thet Mee is survived by his wife Naw Yu Mer and their 5 children. He will be remembered for his passion and commitment to preserving Indigenous Karen cultural traditions, promoting customary Kaw land stewardship, and sharing Indigenous knowledge with the younger generations.

The Incident

In the early evening of March 31, 2020, Saw Thet Mee and his wife Naw Yu Mer from Htee Baw Kee village in Kaw Thay Ghu, Saw Mu Plaw village tract, Luthaw Township, were returning back from the Plaw Ghaw area after visiting their relatives and shopping for food and other tradeable goods such as betel nuts. In order to get home, Saw Thet Mee had to cross the Burmese military road at a place called Saw Nweh Plaw.

That day, Puh K’Hsaw and his assistant, who have been assigned as village security personnel by the Karen National Union (KNU), went to assist villagers crossing the Burmese military road at Saw Nweh Plaw. As darkness was falling and he saw no threats, Puh K’Hsaw thought the villagers would be safe to cross the road. Villagers from both sides began crossing the Burmese military road at around 6:40 PM. Saw Thet Mee, Naw Yu Mer, three friends and one KNU soldier crossed the road carrying rice, snacks, betel nuts, and farming tools.



Saw Thet Mee with his wife Naw Yu Mer and their five children

The group had just crossed the road and had gone about 100 metres, when at about 6:50 PM a group of 10 Burma Army soldiers opened fire at them. The group ran for their lives. Puh K'Hsaw and his assistant, who were armed, fired a few shots back at the Burma Army soldiers to protect the villagers. As they were fleeing, Saw Thet Mee's wife heard him cry out that he had been shot, and that the rest should flee without him.

It is believed that Saw Thet Mee died during the shooting, but no one knows how many times he was shot or for how long he suffered. It is thought that perhaps because Saw Thet Mee was carrying betel nut in a white sack, the Burmese soldiers could see him more clearly and therefore were able to target him despite the growing darkness.

On April 4, once they were sure that the Burmese soldiers had left the area, some villagers returned to retrieve Saw Thet Mee's body, but there was no trace of his body, nor the things that he had been carrying. According to Indigenous Karen traditions, the family must perform a cremation ceremony so that the person's spirit can find its path into the afterlife. Not finding Saw Thet Mee's body, the family had to go to the scene of his murder and call his spirit back to the village for the funeral ceremony.

The Burma Army soldiers had a clear intention to shoot and kill local Karen civilians. We know this because on the same morning, March 31, Burmese soldiers also fired at villagers crossing at the Htoh Kaw Lo Kloe location, about 1 km from the place where Saw Thet Mee was killed. Fortunately, no one was harmed that time. When the Burma Army patrols the area, the soldiers usually return to their camps in the evening. On this occasion, they had dug a pit in the early morning and hid, waiting until evening to attack. The soldiers attacked 100 meters from the road, which is beyond the distance from the road (50 meters) that they are allowed to operate in according to ceasefire agreements. The Burma Army soldiers did not shoot at the KNU security personnel who were waiting near, instead aiming at innocent villagers. They then took away Saw Thet Mee's body after he died to destroy evidence of their attack.

Another tragic and unnecessary loss

For the SPP and all people of Mutraw, Saw Thet Mee's death is a tragedy. We will never forget his dedication in the ongoing struggle to build peace and protect ancestral lands.

Our community members, leaders, and activists continue to be targeted and killed by the Burma Army. Saw Thet Mee's death was not an accident. His death was due to the Burma Army's purposeful, continued, and cruel attacks on Karen civilians.

The Burma Army continues to violate the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) and attack Karen civilians. SPP Committee condemns the brutal actions of the Burma Army and its disregard for local villagers' lives. This tragedy, and the recurring loss of our community members, could be avoided if the Burma Army stopped violating the ceasefire and committed to resolve rising tensions through nonviolent dispute resolution mechanisms.

The heart-breaking death of Saw Thet Mee reminds us the importance of continuing to work together for meaningful, lasting peace for the people of Kawthoolei. Saw Thet Mee's memory will live in the hearts of the people of the Salween Peace Park.

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*Saw Thet Mee (back row, 6th from right) at a Kaw workshop in 2015.
Saw O Moo (first row, 3rd from left) who was murdered by the Burma Army in April 2018, also attended this meeting*