

The plight *of the* Shan

*Genocide, torture, and ignorance:
In Burma people are dying and
the world takes no notice*

By Antonio Graceffo
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TAIWAN — “When I fled my village in Burma I had to leave my baby behind. She was too small to survive the jungle,” says Nang Ga, a 25-year-old Shan tribe woman.

She hid in the jungle after the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC, soldiers of the Burmese army demanded that one member from every family be forced to work as porters or be killed.

With tear-filled eyes Ga says, “The SPDC said we weren’t allowed to go into the rice fields anymore. How could we survive if we couldn’t grow food? They told us if we ran away they would shoot us!”

Many westerners have never heard of the Shan, even though they are the largest ethnic minority group in Burma with a population of approximately 7 million. In a brutal war that has been going on for nearly 60 years the Burmese junta occupy Shan ethnic villages to control the rural populations.

Rape, torture, murder, slavery and forced relocation are common. Parents are often killed or separated from their children, leaving tens of thousands of orphans living in refugee camps in Thailand or IDP — internally displaced people — camps in Burma.

The Shan are not eligible for refugee status. As a result most work illegally as servants, laborers or prostitutes. Children, 12 years old or younger, eke out an existence as undocumented migrant workers in Thailand.

When the SPDC raided her village, Nan Ga’s husband, 21-year-old Non Geet, was away from home, serving in the Shan State Army, or SSA, a tribal defense force, battling for the independence of Shan State. Nan Ga hid in the jungle for two months before being found by a SSA battalion. She was reunited with her husband at the rebel army’s headquarters of Loi Tai Leng.

Nang Ga and Non Geet are among roughly 3,000 internally displaced people who have taken refuge at Loi Tai Leng. The base, which is set high upon the ridgeline on the Burmese side of the border with Thailand, is surrounded by minefields and guarded by several thousand rebel soldiers.

Inside, the villagers are trying to rebuild their shattered lives. They have built a meeting hall, a temple, several restaurants, and a school. The children are educated in both English and their native tongue to keep their cultural traditions alive.

Nang Ga says, “Life is better here than in our village. The SSA gives us food. In Shan State we had to pay for school, but we were too poor. In Loi Tai Leng school is free.”

The young parents have no news whether their child is alive or dead. The villages don’t have telephones, and visiting the child would mean weeks of walking through hostile enemy territory.

Non Geet has never seen his child (he was with the Shan State Army at the time). He says, “She would be 4 years old now.”

Nang Ga, who is expecting a second child, dreams that someday their two children will be reunited to share their bamboo hut.

Motioning toward her pregnant belly, she says “This baby will go to school and live in safety. And she will never be hungry.”

When the school bell rings for lunch break the children file out into the street and wait patiently in line for their basic issue of food, as they do three times per day. They are given rice topped off with watery vegetables. They only eat meat once a week.

Kawn Wan, 20 years old, is an English teacher at Loi Tai Leng. He learned to speak English after coming to the rebel base in 2001. In his first English poem Kawn Wan describes his parent’s murder by the SPDC: “The sound of a gun took my family away.”

He remembers his parents’ fateful day with vivid detail. Kawn Wan believes he has relatives who are still alive inside Shan State.

He says, “I haven’t heard anything about them since I came to Loi Tai Leng. They left the village to look for food. Some people told me the SPDC caught them.”

Kawn Wan has lived half his life as an orphan. Now he looks after the 197 boys who live at the dormitory at Loi Tai Leng, giving them the care he never had.

Pointing to two young boys who live at the dormitory, Kawn Wan says, “They are orphans and have been here for about four years.” Shaking his head sadly, he says, “They don’t remember anything, not even the name of their village.”

The orphans, refugees and soldiers have formed a new community at the rebel camp while the war in Burma rages around them. In 2005 the base came under attack.

For forty-five days the inhabitants were subjected to constant artillery barrages and frontal assaults by the SPDC and United Wa State Army. The Wa are another ethnic minority group who have come to a cease fire agreement with the SPDC and earn their money from drug trafficking.

Loi Tai Leng survived the attack but the memories of the battle are ever present in the minds of the IDP’s at the camp. Things are quiet for now, but the villagers know this could change overnight.

The Shan people are part of the Tai ethnic group, which includes the Lao and the Thai. The Shan feel themselves to be the historical cousins of the Thai. The soldiers were given a day off to celebrate the 80th birthday of the king of Thailand.

In every Shan home, there is a Buddhist shrine depicting images of the current Thai King, His Majesty Rama IX and the ancient Thai King Naresuen, who helped the Shan king fight against the Burmese. The King of Thailand is credited with providing most of the outside aid to the Shan.



Photo by Antonio Graceffo

Unfortunately, to maintain good relations with Burma, Thailand cannot officially or openly endorse the Shan resistance.

Tun Yee is a young Shan soldier. Yee says, “I am not sure if I am 20 or 21. It seems like a long time ago. My father died when I was very young. When I was about 10, the SPDC attacked our village when my mother was in the rice fields.”

The monks who lived in his village helped Tun Yee escape. He says, “We walked through the jungle for about a month.” Tun Yee lived illegally in a Shan temple as a monk in Thailand until he was 15, when he moved to Loi Tai Leng to attend school for the first time in his life.

Tun Yee doesn’t know if his mother is alive. Recently, a newly arrived refugee told Tun Yee that a Shan woman bearing the same name as his mother, and who also lost her son, was living in the city of Fang in Northern Thailand.

The soldiers had to restrain the impetuous youth, to prevent him from running across the Thai border where he was sure to be arrested. Once again, the monks intervened. The head Abbot of the temple at Loi Tai Leng ordained Tun Yee as a 10-day monk. His head was shaved and he donned the sacred robes of a novice.

Together, with the head Abbot, he made the long journey by car, first to Chiang Mai, and then Fang. Along the



Photo by Antonio Graceffo

ABOVE: Two Shan men show off their war wounds. Many people have lost limbs and their lives in the war. **TOP:** A child watches and waits in the Shan enclave of Burma where a civil war has raged for years.

way, they were stopped numerous times by Thai military, but the Abbot talked them through all of the checkpoints before reaching their destination.

Yee says with tear-filled eyes, “It wasn’t her. I don’t even remember what she looks like. When I close my eyes, I try to imagine her face, but I just don’t see it anymore.”

At eighteen years of age, Hsai Leurn is the youngest teacher at the school. Hsai Leurn is a budding artist. He has drawn portraits of the Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi and has learned to sing the song, “Freedom from Fear.”

Aung San Suu Kyi, the brave woman who the West has chosen as the face of the conflict in Burma, won the only free election in recent Burmese history and has been under house arrest ever since.

Her party, National League for Democracy, is extremely popular among Burmese in exile. Inside Burma, however, open support for the National League for Democracy or the mere mention of the name Aung San Suu Kyi could be dangerous business, resulting in arrest, torture, or execution.

Her biography, “Freedom from Fear,” has become a kind of Bible for Burmese who dream of a brighter future. The book inspired a song by the same name, which has become a mantra. Freedom from Fear could be interpreted this way: If you can release yourself from fear, you can have anything. Or maybe it means that when the Burmese have political and spiritual freedom, they will also have freedom from the fear which rules their everyday lives.

In the free countries, when small children sleep, their parents leave a light on so the children won’t be scared. In Shanland, turning on the lights would give the enemy a target for artillery fire. Only a free election, not a nightlight, could free the Shan children from fear.

Hsai Leurn says, “We respect Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy. Although she has never made any official statement regarding the independence of Shan State, many Shan support Aung San Suu Kyi. Whether or not they gain independence, the Shan will probably have a better life under a free democracy than under a dictatorship.

Kawn Wan says, “The NLD have never visited us in the jungle. They cannot help us. They cannot even help themselves ... You foreigners, when you aren’t happy with something, you go and change it. You protest and fight. But here in Burma, it is impossible for us.

“I want the American people to know that we have a country, but we cannot live. We have no human rights. The government doesn’t do anything for us. We want the international community to tell the SPDC to give us democracy. We want to live freely like other countries. In America and democratic countries they have freedom and they have rights. They can use their rights to help us.

“When I lived in Shan State I didn’t know about democracy. When I went to school I learned about free society and human rights ... Now I want to use this knowledge to help my people.”

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