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# On the Run: In Burma's Jungle Hell



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—A YOUNG BOY PEERS OUT OF A BAMBOO HUT IN SAW WA DER, A DISPLACED PERSONS COMMUNITY IN THE JUNGLES OF THE NORTHERN KAREN STATE, WHERE HE LIVES WITH HIS FAMILY AFTER BEING FORCED TO ABANDON HIS VILLAGE BY THE BURMESE ARMY.

Lush forests, raging rivers, and steep hills circle Burma's central plain from west to east like a giant horseshoe. It is an idyllic landscape, home to Hsar K'Tray Saw, a 13-year-old Karen boy who lost his sight when a landmine planted by Burmese soldiers exploded outside his village. It is also where a 37-year-old mother was gang raped by half a dozen soldiers in a rice field; where the body of an unknown porter lays rotting down a jungle trail, shot as he was trying to

escape enslavement by the Burmese Army; where old, young, and infirm villagers alike grab their few possessions and flee into the jungle, hiding from merciless army patrols like hunted game for weeks, months, sometimes years. In short, this is a land of fear.

Ethnic minorities make up 30 percent to 40 percent of Burma's estimated 55 million population and occupy 60 percent of the territory. They are Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, Wa, to name

the largest and better known nationalities. From the earliest days, these ethnic people have stood up to the Burmese government, proclaiming their determination to pursue an independent way of life. But rulers in Rangoon were not content to allow minorities to control the vast natural resources of these territories. In the late 1960s, the military regime launched a massive counter-insurgency strategy in those territories called the “Four Cuts” policy. They aimed to push the insurgents from central Burma into the nation’s more remote, mountainous areas, cutting off support from the local population (food, money, intelligence, and new recruits). The generals mapped the country into black, brown, and white zones—respectively, guerrilla-controlled, mixed government-insurgency control, and government-controlled. In the “black zones,” soldiers were given license to shoot at will.

The policy amounted to an endless and efficient ethnic cleansing campaign that continues today. Burmese soldiers, emboldened by a system that ensures total impunity, have engaged in murder, rape, torture, destruction, looting, forced labour, and child conscription. The army’s daily oppression also prevails in the brown zones, although with a less brutal but more insidious façade, dubbed “Burmanization”—the gradual replacement of local tribes by ethnic Burmese settlers. Life in the brown zones depends entirely on local commanders’ good, or more often bad, moods. Reports of forced labor, economic exploitation, and all varieties of harassment are ever present.

According to the relief organization Thailand Burma Border Consortium, between 1996—the year of the first comprehensive survey—and 2009, some 3,506 villages in eastern Burma, the area most deeply affected by military oppression, were destroyed, abandoned, or forcibly relocated into communities under the army’s control. Over 600,000 people have been displaced.

Pursued relentlessly, 13 armed ethnic groups agreed on a cease-fire with the junta from 1989 to the mid-1990s. Today, only a handful of armed organizations—mainly the Karen National Union, the Karenni National Progressive Party, and the Shan State Army-South—are still resisting the regime. But “cease-fire groups,” among them the powerful Wa and Kachin along the Chinese border, are increasingly ill at ease with the junta’s new strategy to transform them into militias under its control before the general election planned for the end of this year.

The innocents caught in the middle of the fighting were basically left alone to their miserable destiny—until 1997, when a former U.S. Special Forces soldier involved in relief work along the Thai border founded the Free Burma Rangers (FBR), an armed humanitarian relief group. They began to train young volunteers from ethnic minorities on the basics of medical treatment, relief, rebuilding, and psychological counselling. Organized as mobile teams, they are dispatched from Thailand into black and brown zones, usually for a few months, where they offer emergency medical and material relief to the displaced people.

It is dangerous work, but an FBR motto holds, “you cannot run if the people cannot run.” For security, FBR teams link up the remaining rebel groups, but both guerrilla and civilian alike live in constant fear of Burmese soldiers and landmines. Today, about 50 Ranger teams from nine ethnic groups are operational. In 13 years, they have conducted more than 400 missions and treated 400,000 people. They are almost entirely funded by private donations, much of it from U.S. donors, particularly Christian churches, with an annual operating budget of just over \$1.3 million.

Each year since 1999, I have spent three to five weeks accompanying Free Burmese Ranger missions into the ethnic territories of Burma. ●



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—SAW THA DOH WA, A 54-YEAR-OLD FARMER, SITS WITH HIS WIFE AND TWO OF THEIR SEVEN CHILDREN IN FRONT OF A HUT MADE FROM LEAVES AND BRANCHES. THE BURMESE ARMY FORCED THEM TO LEAVE THEIR VILLAGE, SI KWE DER, LOCATED ALONG THE ROUTE OF A NEW ROAD BEING BUILT THROUGH THE JUNGLE. [TOP]

—A WOMAN, ALSO FORCED FROM HER HOME BY THE BURMESE ARMY, FEEDS A YOUNG CHILD IN A DISPLACED PERSONS' COMMUNITY IN THE JUNGLE OF THE NORTHERN KAREN STATE. [BOTTOM]



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—KAREN REFUGEES TAKE REFUGE FROM THE RAINS AND BURMESE SOLDIERS IN LER BER HER, A CAMP SHELTERING ABOUT 800 DISPLACED PEOPLE. LATER, THE DEMOCRATIC KAREN BUDDHIST ARMY, A JUNTA PROXY, HEAVILY SHELLED THE CAMP, FORCING ITS RESIDENTS TO FLEE TO THAILAND. [TOP]

—BEFORE FINALLY ABANDONING HIS VILLAGE OF BOO HKEE, A KAREN FARMER SCAVENGES THROUGH THE WRECKAGE OF HIS HOME BURNED BY THE BURMESE ARMY. [BOTTOM]





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—A COLUMN OF PORTERS CARRYING MEDICINES, BLANKETS, MOSQUITO NETS AND OTHER BASIC EQUIPMENT FOR A MISSION OF THE RELIEF GROUP FREE BURMA RANGERS WALKS THROUGH A RICE FIELD ON ITS WAY TO A DISPLACED PERSONS' COMMUNITY IN NORTHERN KAREN STATE. [TOP]

—ARMED MEMBERS OF A TEAM OF FREE BURMA RANGERS, ESCORT DOCTORS, DENTISTS, AND RELIEF WORKERS EN ROUTE TO A JUNGLE CAMP WHERE THEY WILL HELP HEAL AND FEED KAREN VILLAGERS DRIVEN FROM THEIR HOMES. [BOTTOM]



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—A FREE BURMA RANGER COMES ACROSS THE BODY OF A PORTER FORCIBLY ENROLLED BY THE BURMESE ARMY WHO WAS SHOT AND ABANDONED IN THE JUNGLE. THERE IS A BULLET HOLE IN HIS BACK. ACCORDING TO LOCAL SOURCES, THE PORTER WAS SHOT A FEW WEEKS BEFORE DURING AN ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE. [TOP]

—ETHNIC KAREN GUERRILLAS, IN CHARGE OF THE SECURITY OF A TEAM OF FREE BURMA RANGERS RELIEF WORKERS, WALK ALONG THE BANKS OF THE MON RIVER IN NORTHERN KAREN STATE. [BOTTOM]





—RELIEF WORKERS AND THEIR ESCORTS MUST TRAVEL CAUTIOUSLY ACROSS FIELDS AND THROUGH THE JUNGLES OF NORTHEASTERN BURMA, A HEAVILY MINED TERRITORY PATROLLED BY GOVERNMENT TROOPS SEEKING TO PURSUE THEIR PROJECT OF ETHNIC CLEANSING. [TOP]

—A RELIEF TEAM GATHERS SEVERAL HUNDRED DISPLACED PERSONS—PARENTS AND THEIR CHILDREN—IN A FIELD TO DISTRIBUTE EMERGENCY MEDICAL PROVISIONS, CLOTHING, BLANKETS, AND TOYS. [BOTTOM]





—SHANNON ALLISON, A 48-YEAR-OLD DENTIST FROM LOUISIANA AND FORMER U.S. ARMY SPECIAL FORCES OFFICER, TEACHES THE BASICS OF DENTISTRY TO MEDICS FROM THE RELIEF GROUP. SINCE 1999, ALLISON VOLUNTEERS TO SPEND A FEW WEEKS EACH YEAR IN THE BURMESE JUNGLE TO ASSIST RANGER TEAMS. [TOP]

—THE T-SHIRT OF A FREE BURMA RANGER URGES PEACE AND RECONCILIATION. [BOTTOM]

