



Projects to Support Refugees from Burma and Help 4 Forgotten Allies

Trip Report



Annual trip to Burma/Myanmar and the Thai-Burma border 30.01.14 – 28.02.14

By Sally Steen

Since political developments in Burma/Myanmar are intrinsically linked to the future of the refugees on the Thai Burma border and the welfare of the 2nd WW veterans and widows living in the country itself, we include this short summary of the main issues and changes in the country 2013/14.

It is evident that the process of democratic reform begun in 2011 is now irreversible, that hope continues to rise and foreign investment grows at a breathtaking rate. Yet these changes in a society that remained frozen in time for decades is producing an inevitable backlash from entrenched power brokers in the country; in particular the Army and the Buddhist establishment.

As international aid money pours in funding the peace process and development projects, and as debts are forgiven (the Germans recently cancelled over 1 billion euros) the government increasingly finds the conditions demanded by the West and UN agencies clash with Burmese society's traditional values. Women's rights and religious tolerance, subjects previously veiled in silence by the military junta, now emerge for discussion in an uncensored press. Islamophobia has gripped the country causing riots and violence. Environmental issues such as the damming of rivers, pollution from mining, land grabs, and eviction of thousands of squatters in Yangon, provoke large demonstrations and marches. While the government appears to keep its transition to democracy on track and simultaneously maintain an uneasy control, public and international attention is diverted from the vital issue of reforming the constitution upon which all lasting change hangs.

THE CONSTITUTION

In the military-drafted 2008 Constitution, Section 436 of Chapter 12 states that more than 75 percent of parliament must vote to pass any amendment. The military automatically hold 25% of seats in the parliament. It must then be ratified by a nationwide referendum and approved by more than half of all eligible voters. Until this happens the Army will continue to maintain a power of veto on any new legislation in the parliament. Without reform the Army are able to block the peace process, the formation of a

truly federal union army, law reform, greater political power in ethnic areas, suppression of land grabs, religious tolerance, environmental legislation, educational and health reforms; in fact every pressing issue in urgent need of reform. Without it, the Army will retain power and cronyism will persist. Support for and opposition to reform is becoming increasingly polarised within the government. Uncharacteristically Aung San Su Kyi has recently appealed for the Burmese people to demonstrate on this issue. Crucially under the current constitution she is disqualified from holding the presidency because of her marriage to Michael Aris. "The lady" is well established as head of her party the NLD, which however only have 47 seats in parliament. She was recently invited to China, and enjoys huge popular support and international recognition. She stressed that she and her party cannot change the country alone; 80% of the population are still without electricity, only 5% own a mobile phone, in Chin State 73% of people live below the poverty line. Tens of thousands in Yangon are homeless; as squatters their temporary homes were destroyed recently. There is much work to be done, but first she needs to be elected as president.

THE CENSUS

The long awaited national census is currently taking place; people may register as any one of 135 ethnic identities, but no identity has been included for the Rohingyas of Western Burma/Myanmar, despite UN demands and involvement. This group which makes up 29% of Arakan State, living alongside majority Rakhine Buddhists is officially stateless. Recently Medecins Sans Frontieres was denied permission to work with the Rohingya and NGO workers were forced to leave following violent demonstrations in the capital Sittwe. After over a year of violence in Arakan state 140,000 Rohingyas have been displaced and are living in desperate conditions. Following anti muslim riots in many parts of Burma/Myanmar a radical Buddhist movement

headed by the senior monk U Wirathu has emerged. It has been responsible for legislation now being considered that will prevent women born into Buddhist families from marrying non Buddhists without the permission of their families and local monastery. A Buddhist monk spokesman said "The law is necessary because our Buddhist women are not intelligent or educated enough to protect themselves." U Wirathu has said publicly that he is opposed to Aung San Suu Kyi standing as president in the forthcoming elections.

THE PEACE PROCESS

The Government has signed ceasefires with 15 ethnic armed groups and agreed to stop forced labour, but there is still no joint nationwide ceasefire. The "peace process" is treated with cautious optimism by ethnic nationalities. A condition of the ethnic armies is that there should be genuine political dialogue following on from a ceasefire. Meanwhile fighting continues in Kachin State and has caused 100,000 to be displaced there since 2011; the Kachin have asked the UN to intervene. More positively displacement and violence overall have decreased nation wide and a new government appointed committee, which includes nine ethnic leaders, and from the government side three military commanders, three parliamentarians and three cabinet officials has been set up to continue the process.

LAST WORD

Tomas Ojea Quintana, the UN's special rapporteur on human rights, whose mandate expires in May, wrote in his report last month, "The rule of law cannot yet be said to exist in Myanmar," ... "For the time being, the military retains a prevailing role in the life and institutions, (which) in general remain unaccountable,". "A critical step will be to secure ceasefire and political agreements with ethnic minority groups, so that Myanmar can finally transform itself into a peaceful multi-ethnic and multi-religious society,". While welcoming the dramatic political reforms that have taken place in Myanmar since the country emerged from decades of harsh military rule in 2011, Ojea Quintana also stressed the need to focus on past wrongs. There has as yet been no apology, expression of remorse or establishment of a truth and reconciliation process to address Burma Army attacks, oppressions, human rights violations, war crimes and displacement.

People in the Union and on the Thai Burma border are waiting to see what the results of the elections are before feeling sure that democratic changes are here to stay. It remains to be seen if the seedlings of the

Burmese Spring are to flourish or be stunted by Army greed and grab.

H4FA – BURMA/MYANMAR

30th January to 9th February

H4FA was able last year to establish an income generating project in Yangon/Rangoon by paying for the building of a simple hostel for students. The income provides for medical expenses and support for the elderly 2nd WW veterans and their widows in this area and beyond. Profits so far have been spent on eye operations, funerals, an oxygen cylinder, and for general welfare and support. The hostel cost £4,653 to establish and the annual income is £504

We discussed the current system of distributing welfare grants to over 240 veterans and widows from Yangon/Rangoon many of whom are Karen living in Karen State, in the Delta area and in the city itself and beyond. The area covered is huge and travel is hard on bad roads to reach these very old people, but poverty is so great that the money, however little is greatly welcomed. Through a network, somehow these small amounts of money reach old soldiers and widows as far away as the Shan State.

The Burma Forces Welfare Association has been providing individual welfare grants inside Burma/Myanmar while H4FA has provided for those on the Thai Burma border. However annual welfare grants for those in Burma/Myanmar were between only £28 to £9 individually a year, and H4FA hopes to be able to supplement this and provide extra support.



On the outskirts of Yangon/Rangoon many people are now homeless and live in temporary shacks. Recently thousands were driven out and their

homes destroyed. We visited a Burmese ex serviceman who lives in such a shack His only income is his pension of £19 a month, out of which he has to pay £12 rent for the shack. We entered carefully for fear of falling through the floor into the stagnant water underneath. The old man has advanced dementia, and had been left to beg at the side of the road. His commanding officer was a Major Scott.



He joined up in 1945 and he is 89 years old. It was suggested that for cases like his there is a need to start a small home, the cost would be a modest £60 a month for three.

One Karen old soldier

asked us to sell his Burma Gallantry medal awarded for taking back a wireless set singlehandedly from a Japanese camp captured from the British. He is 92 and wanted to donate to his local Church and give to his children before he died. The money realised by the sale will transform his and his family's lives, but it is sad that he should need to sell it.

The Chin

We met the representative for the 265 old soldiers and widows in Chin State in Western Burma/Myanmar. Chin State is one of the poorest areas in Burma and very underdeveloped, many of his cases are in extreme poverty. It claims to be 100% Christian, and has suffered discrimination accordingly.

60 Chin old soldiers are still alive and were in the Chin Levies 1st, 2nd 3rd, 4th, the Chin Rifles, Chin Hill Battalion, and Burma Frontier Forces, one was awarded a Military Cross and another a Burma Gallantry Medal; they fought at the battle of Imphal. From those far off days a Major Hyde wrote the following, " We were soon joined by a Colonel and his staff, who set about raising Levies from among the local Chins. I think they, the Chins, liked the idea and brought out their ancient black powder guns, or rather muskets, later service rifles

were issued. They made their own gunpowder, and for shot cut up telephone wires. The Chin Hills Battalion was a very well organised unit, extremely self contained and fully capable of looking after itself in this remote area. Falam, the HO, is about 40 miles from the plains, and 600' up into the clouds."

Change in the country

Public assemblies are now allowed and people enjoy being able to meet and travel freely. The two hundred year commemoration of Adoniram Judson (a famous American missionary), brought 20,000 Baptists from all over Burma/Myanmar to Yangon/Rangoon. Many of the people attending had never seen the city before because of the previous restrictions.

In Karen State villages people report that their lives have changed since the ceasefire in January 2012 between the Karen National Liberation Army and the Burma Army. They say "now is heaven" compared to the past; bridges have been rebuilt, houses have become bigger and there are shops and more motorbikes. Before the ceasefire villagers had not even been allowed to own a battery for their torch in case they gave it to KNLA rebel soldiers. They no longer need travel permits to simply visit their orchards, and don't have to pay the same exorbitant taxes on their rice harvest. They can trade, making money on selling rice, fishing and making fish paste to sell, sometimes as far afield as to Karen people who have resettled from the camps in the US and Australia, who miss traditional Karen food.

VISIT TO LOIKAW CAPITAL OF KARENNI OR KAYAH STATE - 5th and 7th February

Loikaw until recently has been closed to foreigners, and is home to many of the old soldiers and widows. We met 96 year old Saw Noe, and talked to him about his experiences in the 2nd WW. His English is good. "Col. Peacock called me" he recounted, "I worked for him from April 1945 to October 1945. My work was to collect articles when Allied planes made drops in the Otter Green Area", (then occupied by the Japanese). "Sometimes there were problems with cloudy weather and the planes could not drop. Twice a week they dropped; arms, food, biscuits - at midnight." The drops were made on a mountain, to avoid detection. Every night a tiger came near

his tent, he told us, but he couldn't shoot it or the Japanese would have heard.



Finally the villagers helped them to set a trap which caught the tiger. Famous battles in this area were on

the Taungoo/ Mawchi Road.

We met a widow, Cecilia, her husband had been called Nelson. Many of the Karen and Karenni adapted their names after the British had left to make them seem more Burmese and less British in order to get work, so his too was changed.

Nelson had retreated to Bombay with the British Army. He fought with General Orde Wingate; and on the retreat he fought on the Lido Road. He left a box of papers and medals with his son, but the ants had eaten all the papers, the family only have the medals.

We then visited Saw Tun Thein 86 born 1927. Saw Tun Thein told us optimistically "there is a saying, the British people left us, the Burmese die but the Karen eat and sleep." Born in the



Irrawaddy Delta and left school when the Japanese invaded, he had worked as a boat man. In 1945 he joined the British army and served until 1947. In 1945 he was with the armed police, a driver for the Engineers in 1947 with the 3rd KR. He thinks the British are honest and straight. His father was in the British Army in 1914.

Abraham and Soloman

Soloman enlisted when he was 13 although he apparently told the Army authorities he was 15.



He was with Force 136 Special Forces as a wireless operator. He was in three battles, not fighting but on wireless duty only. He had to re charge the battery by manual cranking, the whole day.

He thinks the Japanese were very cruel and said that nobody liked them. The people were starving under them. He told us that the British had promised to help them after the war but the Karen and Karenni were disappointed by them.

Abraham his brother was also in Force 136. He worked as an interpreter and was taken to Taungoo, and sent to meet Colonel Peacock. It was a three day journey on foot. After the war he was appointed to the Relief and Supply department helping those who were starving. "How did you feel about Independence?" "he was asked. "Not very much", he replied. "We didn't understand." "How do you feel about the British?" "Very good people, they have the best government", he replied. Abraham was paralysed down one side and his wife Louisa signed for his grant money.

We visited Naw Ser Ser widow of Saw La Moo. I



ask what unit her husband was with and was told he was a Gurkha, a Sergeant, born 1917.

She is 91 years old, too old to get to the Church they tell me. Apparently the family couldn't show me any papers as someone had taken them all in 1983 saying that they would help her husband, but then they had heard no more. Her grandson is called Wingate.

Naw Ser Ser talked about her memories of how the Japanese came to her village near Papun and how frightened she had been. Her husband was taken as a prisoner of war.

£16,123 has been spent on veterans and widows in Burma/Myanmar in 2013/14 by H4FA

THAILAND

The 150,000 mainly Karen refugees in nine camps the length of the Thai Burma border, continue to wait for terms to be agreed following the cease fire in January 2012 between the government and the Karen National Union. Issues such as land ownership, land-mine clearance, and the exact terms of their return home between are still to be settled. The time frame laid down by the Thai and Burma governments and the Thai Border Consortium was two years, we have now passed this deadline, and funding for those in the camps is being steadily reduced by donors. People in the camps are anxious, they see a build up of the Burma Army in Karen State rather than troop numbers reduced, and feel very uncertain about their safety if they go home. It had been agreed that refugees may choose to remain as migrant workers in Thailand, or go home, but with political instability in Thailand, nothing seems certain. The resettlement process to third countries is completed with a total of 81,700 people having left.

In expectation of the refugees return to Karen State and the closure of the camps, money for rations, is being steadily reduced by donors. The "remittances" from relatives in Australia, US and Europe have become a lifeline for the camp inmates. The poverty and overcrowded nature of the camps is evident.

MAE HONG SON

12th February - 15th February

On this visit it was not possible to visit Karenni site 2 camp, the newly rebuilt Bible College and the remaining old soldiers and widows there, but meetings were arranged in Mae Hong Son to bring PSRB/H4FA up to date with developments. The person responsible for delivering grant money to this camp explained that one of the old soldiers is now blind, and another bedridden. One, Saw Olay who had expected to join his family in

Australia as part of the resettlement programme can now hardly walk; he failed his medical test and is not able to go. We passed on a hearing aid donated by Boots to Saw Ha Char and hope it will make his life easier. Only one old man, Saw Pah Cha Law is still strong and lives alone. He requested money to make donations to his Church. He likes to read the gospel at Church with a loudspeaker during the service.

On the day of the huge fire in this camp in March 2013, which killed 37, and destroyed 432 and began late afternoon, many people after night fall stood in the river for safety as the fire raged; the situation became very confused. Families could not find each other and panicked.

When I questioned how the fire had started I was told many people at the camp had witnessed something being dropped from a plane just before the fire. There has been an investigation but no results have been published.

H4FA sent money to replace the possessions of the widows and old soldiers affected by the fire; the Border Consortium rebuilt all of the 432 houses destroyed.

Karenni Bible College

I met with members of the Bible College committee in Mae Hong Son. PSRB has supported them since 2002. Their buildings in Site 2 were completely destroyed in the fire of March 2013, with only the brass bell left behind. One committee member had died in the fire, but all the rest of the staff, the students and the 22 children were not hurt. They have now, with help from PSRB, donations from Norway (where some ex students have been resettled), and with local support completely rebuilt. However they have not been able to continue with the Bachelor of Theology course they had begun in 2012. They started to function again as a college after rebuilding, with 13 students taking a Certificate of Theology course; four graduated in February.

It is a time of great change for the Bible College, some refugees from the camp are beginning already to move back across the border. They plan to continue for now to remain where they are and wait until the elections of 2015 before making a final decision about moving. However they have already found land near the Salween river, and gained permission to extend an existing Bible

College in Karenni State so that they can merge with them. Fund raising will begin for this in a few months. As with the distance between Loikaw, capital of Karenni State and the Mae Hong Son area, as the crow flies this new site is close, but the journey long by road and it takes several days due to the mountains. Already there are some ex EBS teachers and students who have been living at their proposed new location since 2004.

During its time in site 2 camp, the College has established a wide support base from Thai villages nearby, within Karenni State, through Theological Colleges in Chaing Mae and Yangon and ex students and relatives who had been resettled. This will stand them in good stead with fundraising for the new building.

Living in such an isolated area for many years the now 2,930 refugees remaining in site 2 have become an integrated community and many plan to move with the Bible College which has become a strength to them. They look forward to transportation and communications being easier than at their current location. The internet connection within Karenni state though is very poor, but in site 2 there is none and to get a signal they must climb the mountain.

I ask about the fish pond, pigs and weaving that predated the fire. They say yes they again have pigs, no fish pond, but have established a frog pond, presumably for consumption! They need to replace the large looms they lost in the fire. A Norwegian group apparently sent them replacement sewing machines.

The chair of the Bible college gave me a message for the donors, he thanks them and hopes they will continue to support them as they have in previous years. If the elections are a disappointment they will stay were they are. They remain hopeful.

£5,407 was given by PSRB to the Bible College in 2013

MAE SOT

Emmanuel School, Mae La camp

An experience like no other to visit this camp of 43,279 (March 2014). The people live packed house by house,

no cars, or electricity, it is like going back in time. The sounds are of children reciting their lessons, babies crying, cocks crowing, pigs grunting, chicks peeping, and strangely not of people rowing. Stress and tension though is an issue here. Rations have been reduced from 12 kilos of rice to 8 kilos per month, the lowest amount in 15 years. The fear of fire breaking out and spreading and above all an uncertain future is ever present. Here too people say that they are waiting for the results of the 2015 elections before they can decide to go home. But there is uncertainty also about whether the Royal Thai Government will allow the camps to



remain, and whether donors will give enough to the Border Consortium to keep rations at a feasible level.

The children at Emmanuel Anglican primary school, founded in 2002 put on a show for PSRB of dances and songs, and played the ukelele while the nursery school children who had finished for the day watched through the wire before they made their own way home.

These children may have been born in the camp or fled the Burma Army with their families, before the ceasefire of January 2012, and have had little or no education. They are from Buddhist, Animist or Christian backgrounds and may be any of the ethnic nationalities; but are predominately Karen.

I brought with me a Blue Planet DVD, solar lights and seeds and spoke to the children of the symbolic significance of the world's infinite possibilities, of light and growth.

The headmistress Naw Gloria asked for financial support to provide a new roof for the main classroom that was higher than the existing one, so that it would not be so very hot. She wants to limit classes to 25 as all classes share this one large shelter and the noise level makes it hard for the teachers to work. Children in these schools learn by rote.

This year extra funding from PSRB has enabled the school to offer some food to the children, as well as paying for a Christmas party, and materials for music, sewing, and art classes. We ensure the teachers get what is in camp terms a good salary of £30 a month, and that the school can repair its buildings. Without PSRB the school would not be able to operate and the committee, teachers, and parents thanked us warmly for giving the children a "bright future."

PSRB donated £6,842 to Emmanuel School in 2013/14.

H4FA - Mae Sot area
16th February - 20th February 2014

The Karen Refugee Committee is responsible for distributing welfare grants to old soldiers and widows in five refugee camps. We took gifts of noodles, biscuits, washing powder, shampoo, soap, coffee, and chocolate drinks to the camp on the 18th February, buying 50 separate sets. Security had been tightened making the visit uncertain.

This year the grant money has been increased to £120 each, with provision of an emergency fund for health needs during the year and an extra grant to families for funerals. The grant by western standards is meagre, and the situation for veterans on either side of the border lamentable for men who risked their lives to defend freedom, but the now very elderly group were very pleased with their cash and individual cash.

Among others we met Saw Lin Aye the pastor, with his wife and granddaughter looking very bright.

Naw Thay Po, widow who had made the long journey from inside Karen State.



Saw Percy:



Naw Pe Ter Day, widow (who had told us in 2010 the secret of her long life was to take a paracetamol every night) could no longer come but sent her daughter. She is now 103.

Naw Wah Ler is widow to a Saw Mark Ku; they had seen a lot of fighting she said and had received money twice from the British army. He had been in the medical unit and had been awarded medals but their house was burnt down by the Burma Army and the medals were lost. She had been a widow in the refugee camp for 20 years.

One old man Saw Po Thoo could recite his army service number, but had dementia. He sang in Japanese, which given the circumstances was a little incongruous. We visited Saw Dwe Maung, 92, at his home.

He apologised for not being able to speak good English; he also enjoys singing, and sang for us in English.



He feels dizzy and has pain in his knees when he tries to walk, he told us. I asked him what he needs and he replies that my visiting him once a year was enough. I tell him all about our patron Dame Vera Lynn and of her support, and attempt to sing "We'll meet again" to him.

He had been a guerilla fighter with Force 136, Special Forces, and tells us that after the war some British officers came back to visit their Karen soldiers.

He said as I have heard him say before ... "if you combined all the blood of the Karen that has been spilt it would be a river." He added defiantly "Many Karen hate the Burmese; we are very good at fighting while the Burma Army, is very weak at fighting."

I ask if there is anything that we can do to make his life easier. "Nothing," he says. "How about your freedom I ask". "We need freedom", he says. Although these men fought for our freedom, they are denied theirs and are forbidden to go outside these jungle prisons.

I asked him if he thinks about those far off days much. "I never forget", he says. "We were fighting a lot alongside the British, we had to mix rice with sand and we had to eat like that. We always had to be ready day and night." Sometimes it was so dark that he bumped into stones head on while out on patrol. When the Japanese came, Captain Brown asked him "Are you afraid"? "No, not afraid", he said. The two men fought side by side.

Care Villa



Home to a group of 16 land-mine victims, one man, Paul, had learnt to play the violin and he sung to us "On Christ the solid Rock I Stand". This was sung by Major Seagrim and his men before the Japanese ordered them as prisoners to dig their own graves in September 1944.

The men at Care Villa spend their lives disabled by blindness and immobility, and sit under a hot tin roof with little to do. For the most part they are ex Karen soldiers and lost their sight while attempting to defuse land-mines, or lost their legs by stepping on one.

When they were asked if they had any questions for me they wanted to know the age of the Queen; they listen to the radio a lot and thought that the world is so troubled by war that WW3 was coming.

PSRB has contributed to their annual needs for many years. In 2013/14 PSRB gave £1,848 Later at the KRC office payments to the old soldiers and widows were discussed and it was decided to give £200 each for funerals; the Karen normally held large funerals. Saw Dwe Maung's son had phoned after our visit apparently to say that they needed a new roof, although (Saw Dwe Maung himself did not ask) the modest cost would be £60. At this time of year people are busy in the camps making their homes ready for the rainy season. The Border Consortium has had to make cuts in providing housing materials. It was agreed H4FA would pay for this. Roofs are made of a particular kind of leaf.

I was told that the lives of the ex servicemen and widows were very hard; they are dependent on their families and without stability. In the camps, their children cannot work and have no income. If they want any food other than the basic rations of rice and beans, they cannot afford it. If they need medical treatment they often get neglected as medical services in the camps are so stretched; injections have to be paid in cash, but they can't afford them. If they cannot be treated at the clinic in the camp, there are no funds to pay for them to go to the hospital in Mae Sot.

General Tambla Baw, who served with the allies in WW2 and who is over 90 until recently was the President of the Karen National Union. He sent H4FA a message. "On behalf of the former Karen-British soldiers, and the widows of the former soldiers, I would like to express my gratitude for showing us your concern and help in speaking for

those former soldiers and seeking to find support for them.

Many of those soldiers have passed away and the few who remain are becoming absent-minded and forgetful about their past experiences. This is a very difficult time for them in this "old-aged life". They do not receive any other support except through H4FA; they are happy to receive the support whenever handed to them as if they have been expecting this kind of reward as they should deserve. They all send their love and gratitude to you!

"I would like to request you and our friends to continuously support them till their last breath and continue to uphold them in your prayers."

£20,581 was spent on veterans and widows in Thailand during 2013/14

Other payments in 2013/14 were £1,998 to small primary schools in Karenni State,

£500 to support two refugee Bible students, £467 to Christchurch Bangkok to support two Karen refugee children.

£200 to the Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee.

Please note that all travel expenses are paid for privately and not from funds donated for the ex servicemen and widows or PSRB projects.

Our website www.psr.org.uk. We are however experiencing some access problems lately, for which we apologize. We are trying to solve the problem asap.

If you go to YouTube and type in the name of the camps, you can watch audiovisual material from different sources that can give you an impression of life in the camps.

On our website you can see more photos.