

# BORDERS OF HOPE

Photography & Words Lottie Davies



Mae Sot is a small, bustling market town in the middle of the long Thai-Burma border. I travelled there last November to meet some of the many Burmese who have fled the devastation of their homeland to make new lives.

For almost fifty years, Burma has been ruled by one of the most brutal dictatorships in the world, the State Peace and Development Council. The junta has closed Burma to the outside world, thrown its population into darkness and mismanaged its economy into an astounding decline. Fighting between the SPDC and the ethnic rebels continues after 60 years of conflict, littering the countryside with landmines and shattered villages. The dangers of daily life, particularly acute in the rural areas, have led around 156,000 Burmese to flee to Thailand, despite the fact that many are not recognised as refugees by the Thai government.

A few miles from Mae Sot, the Friendship Bridge spans the River Moei and leads to a dusty Burmese town in Karen State. The Karen are the largest ethnic group affected by the civil war in Burma. Currently half of their four-million-strong population is living in the border area as illegal immigrants or in camps, awaiting resettlement. Through a small NGO called Children On the Edge, I met some of the families who are making a life there despite constant uncertainty. The UN has limited power in the area and international aid agencies are conspicuous by their absence but fortunately there are a myriad small charities working under the radar, supporting local schools, hostels and clinics.

The Karen are trapped between worlds, welcome neither in Thailand nor in Burma, but they are fighting hard to keep their community together. I met young teachers who risk deportation to bring education to Karen children who have never seen their homeland, and a monk who left calling and country in order to help his people living in Thailand. I met children who gather food from the jungle forests and want to become doctors.

I met a man named Peacefully, who has set up a boarding house so that Burmese children can continue to go to school on the Thai side of the border, while their families remain in the conflict zone. From Peacefully's balcony you can see the Burmese hills a mile or so away. They are dense with lush green forest, misty at dawn. 'Sometimes, in the morning, we look at our land. It's all our land, you know,' he says.

The Karen are a strong people made stronger by the difficulty of their situation; strong enough to keep hoping that one day they will be able to return home.



### TAH RAY, MAE LA REFUGEE CAMP

TAH RAY IS 66 YEARS OLD. HE HAS LIVED IN MAE LA SINCE IT WAS ESTABLISHED IN 1984, AND IN THE AREA SINCE 1962, WHEN HE FLED BURMA HAVING BEEN FORCED TO WORK AS A PORTER FOR THE SPDC. HE SAYS THAT THE CAMP WAS QUIETER IN THE BEGINNING; THERE WERE FEWER PEOPLE AND FOOD WAS EASY TO FIND. NOW IT'S MORE CROWDED (THE POPULATION HAS GROWN FROM JUST OVER A THOUSAND INHABITANTS IN 1984 TO 46,000 IN 2007), AND HE CAN'T GO OUTSIDE TO FIND FOOD ANY MORE. HE LIVES WITH HIS DAUGHTER, AND HAS NO DESIRE TO LEAVE THE CAMP WHILE THE SPDC ARE IN POWER IN BURMA, NOR TO BE RELOCATED TO A THIRD COUNTRY. TAH RAY HAS MADE THE MAE LA REFUGEE CAMP HIS HOME. 'IT DOESN'T FEEL GOOD TO THINK YOU WILL BE BURIED HERE. THIS IS NOT OUR NATIVE PLACE. WE WOULD LIKE TO GO HOME TO BE BURIED. BUT YOU CANNOT GO BACK TO DIE. BEFORE YOU COULD DIE YOU WOULD BE KILLED'



## NW WAR, MAE LA REFUGEE CAMP

NW WAR, 17, WAS BORN INSIDE MAE LA CAMP, AND HAS NEVER ONCE LEFT. HER SON, CHICK SAI KO, WAS BORN HERE A YEAR AGO. HER MOTHER CAME TO THE CAMP IN 1986, WHEN HER HOME VILLAGE OF DW YIN KONG WAS TAKEN OVER BY THE SPDC, WHO DEMANDED MONEY AND PORTERS FROM THE LOCAL POPULATION. NW WAR'S FATHER WORKS GROWING VEGETABLES AND THE FAMILY LIVES ON THE PROCEEDS, AS WELL AS THE FOOD PROVIDED BY THE CAMP. NW WAR, ALONG WITH HER PARENTS, SON AND TWO SIBLINGS, IS TO BE RELOCATED TO THE UNITED STATES IN THE NEXT YEAR. SHE IS VERY EXCITED AT THE PROSPECT OF A NEW LIFE – SHE THINKS SHE MIGHT LIKE TO STUDY MUSIC. SHE KNOWS ONLY A LITTLE ABOUT AMERICA THROUGH WATCHING TELEVISION, AND SHE IS CURIOUS TO SEE HOW DIFFERENT IT WILL BE TO HER LIFE IN MAE LA, WHICH HAS CONSISTED OF GROWING VEGETABLES, SELLING THEM, EATING AND SLEEPING



MGMAU THAN WIN, THA THA LEI, MO TAW TOO, NO MOO, WAHMEI AND MOOMOO EH,  
ON THEIR FARM NEAR MAE SOT

THIS IS WAHMEI AND HIS FAMILY. HE FLED TO THAILAND WITH HIS TWO SISTERS WHEN THEIR VILLAGE WAS ATTACKED AND BURNED DOWN. HE SCRATCHES OUT A LIVING AS A TENANT FARMER GROWING CORN A FEW MILES OUTSIDE OF MAE SOT, WHILE HIS SISTERS AND THEIR CHILDREN WORK AS DAY LABOURERS AND LIVE IN HUTS NEARBY. WAHMEI, HIS WIFE, CHILDREN AND SISTERS ARE ILLEGAL ECONOMIC MIGRANTS WHO LIVE IN FEAR OF BEING DISCOVERED BY THE THAI AUTHORITIES AND SENT BACK OVER THE BORDER.

THE BENEFITS OF LIVING ON THE COAT-TAILS OF THE THAI ECONOMY ARE MANY – THE COST OF LIVING IS TEN TIMES LOWER HERE THAN AT HOME IN BURMA; THEIR DAY-TO-DAY LIVES ARE RELATIVELY SECURE; THE CHILDREN GO TO A SCHOOL CALLED MORNING GLORY, AND THEY ARE NEAR ENOUGH TO MAE SOT TO ACCESS HEALTHCARE AT THE MAE TAO CLINIC. THE FAMILY SEEMS HAPPY, THEIR QUALITY OF LIFE IS SO MUCH BETTER HERE AND, UNUSUALLY, THE THREE SIBLINGS ARE STILL LIVING TOGETHER



### PAWNENE, THOO MWE KHEE BOARDING HOUSE, THAI-BURMA BORDER

PAWNENE, 11, IS ONE OF MORE THAN 50 CHILDREN LIVING IN THOO MWE KHEE BOARDING HOUSE ON THE THAI-BURMA BORDER. SHE IS FROM A VILLAGE CALLED MAW KER THA IN KAREN STATE, BUT HAS BEEN LIVING IN THE BOARDING HOUSE FOR THE PAST FOUR YEARS, ONLY GOING HOME ONCE OR TWICE A YEAR. PAWNENE'S FATHER WAS KILLED BY STEPPING ON A LANDMINE ONLY A FEW WEEKS BEFORE THIS PICTURE WAS TAKEN.

ONE OF THE MOST DISTRESSING THINGS ABOUT LANDMINE INJURIES IS THAT THEY OFTEN HAPPEN TO THE FAMILY BREADWINNERS. FOR PAWNENE'S MOTHER STILL IN MAW KER THA, LIFE IS DOUBLY DIFFICULT NOW AS SHE HAS TWO OTHER YOUNG CHILDREN TO CARE FOR AND NOBODY TO HELP HER FEED THEM. SHE WOULD LIKE TO KEEP THE OLDER CHILDREN AT HOME WITH HER, SINCE SHE CAN'T AFFORD THE SCHOOL FEES (ABOUT £19 A YEAR), BUT THANKS TO FUNDING FROM BRITISH CHARITY CHILDREN ON THE EDGE, PAWNENE AND HER BROTHER NEYERTAN ARE ABLE TO STAY AT SCHOOL ON THE THAI SIDE OF THE BORDER



## PEACEFULLY, THOO MWE KHEE, THAI–BURMA BORDER

THOO MWE KHEE IS A LIVELY SCHOOL AND BOARDING HOUSE FOR KAREN CHILDREN RUN BY A GENTLE MAN NAMED PEACEFULLY. HE LIVES IN A WOODEN HOUSE WITH HIS WIFE AND SMALL CHILDREN, WHILE THE REFUGEES LIVE IN COOL, PALM-ROOFED DORMITORIES NEARBY. FROM PEACEFULLY'S BALCONY YOU CAN SEE THE BURMESE HILLS NOT FAR AWAY. 'SOMETIMES, IN THE MORNING, WE LOOK AT OUR LAND. IT'S ALL OUR LAND, YOU KNOW,' HE SAYS. NOW 30 YEARS OLD, PEACEFULLY LEFT HIS VILLAGE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE MOEI RIVER WHEN HE WAS 12.

THE SCHOOL AT THOO MWE KHEE OPENED IN 2001, WITH PUPILS MAKING A DAILY JOURNEY ACROSS THE BORDER. IN 2003, THE STAFF OPENED THE BOARDING HOUSE TO ENABLE CHILDREN FROM THE WORST-HIT AREAS TO CONTINUE THEIR EDUCATION. CURRENTLY THE SCHOOL TEACHES AROUND 320 CHILDREN, A NUMBER WHICH IS INCREASING AS THE SITUATION IN BURMA DETERIORATES