

“Armed struggle is not the answer, but we hope that through it our voice will be louder. You have to have an army to make yourself heard in Burma.” Karen refugee living on the Thai border

Burma, a fertile imperial backwater, became independent in 1948. Historical antipathies between the majority Burmans and various indigenous peoples became exacerbated by religious and ideological divisions, and despite its promises to establish separate states, at the end of WW2 the British left the country as divided as it had ever been.

Freedom from colonial shackles came with a quantity of arms and young men trained to use them, and they soon turned against each other. For many years the more urban, cosmopolitan Burmans had subjugated their rural neighbours; the Karen, Chin and other indigenous groups. However, during the colonial years, the British had elevated many Karen to positions of power causing huge resentment. After the war the Karen were disappointed not to have their hopes of independence realised and were joined by the Chin, Kachin, Mon, Shan and Karenni peoples in rebelling against the Burman majority, and the fighting and bloodshed has been going on ever since.

At the same time, for close to fifty years Burma has been ruled by one of the most brutal dictatorships in the world; the State Peace and Development Council. Only 14 years after the country established a fledgling democracy, it was devastated by a military coup - since which time the military junta has closed Burma to the outside world and thrown its population into darkness.

As a result of SPDC control, the Burmese economy has suffered an astounding decline, taking a country once known as ‘the breadbasket of Asia’ to the brink of collapse. The junta has tried various tactics to manage the economy, including in 1988, wholesale currency devaluation - overnight, it declared various bank notes illegal, wiping out the savings of thousands. This effected so many families that the population finally found a voice, with horrific consequences. In Rangoon on 18th September that year, thousands of students demonstrating against the policy were massacred by the Burmese Army. In one day, the rebel movement had become a pro-democracy struggle as much as a separatist one, and the opposition National League for Democracy was formed, led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Despite having being held under house arrest by the SPDC since 1989, Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD won the 1990 elections, and she remains the elected leader of Burma. Since 1988, hundreds of students and politicised young Burmans have joined the refugee communities on the Thai border.

Of the border guerrilla units, the largest is the Karen National Union, or KNU, who made some headway against the SPDC until 1996, when they suffered a devastating defeat largely due to the betrayal of their allies, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). Since then, the situation in the ethnic states has deteriorated still further, while the flood of refugees has continued to increase. It is estimated that at least 3,000 villages have been destroyed in the past 12 years, affecting over a million people. It is likely that more than 300,000 have fled to Thailand, while around 500,000 displaced people are hiding in the jungle. The border refugee population increased to around 156,000 in 2007 and this number is swelling with people fleeing the Irrawaddy Delta in the aftermath of Cyclone Nargis.

Burma in 2008 looks something like this: over a million people have been forced from their homes, there are 1,750 political prisoners, 700 of whom have been detained since the ‘Saffron Revolution’ in 2007. Men, women, children and the elderly are forced to work on the roads, railways and other construction projects. The junta suppresses almost all dissent and wields absolute power in the face of international condemnation and sanctions. It stands accused of the most gross human rights abuses, including food and land requisitions, killings, torture, beatings and rape by the militia.

Daily life in the eastern regions of Burma is unstable, to say the very least. For generations the Karen and their cousins have been living on subsistence agriculture in small rural communities. The delicate balance of living from the land is thrown into havoc when villages are caught between fighting groups. When an SPDC or DKBA unit settles near a village, the soldiers lay landmines, terrorise the local population and drain the area dry of resources before moving on. Health workers who have managed to get into the region report that when troops arrive, they demand livestock and money and often force villagers to join them to work as porters. If they don't get what they demand, they destroy the village along with its crops. They punish communities they suspect of being KNU sympathisers by burning fields, raping women, and handing out summary beatings and executions.

Faced with this kind of existence, many families have gone into hiding deep inside the jungle, creating quasi-official communities known as Internally Displaced Peoples (IDP) camps. There are estimated to be around 630,000 people living in these camps, which are rife with illness and disease. Mosquito nets are few, in terrain notorious for the most virulent form of malaria. Despite widespread violence, malaria is Burma's biggest killer, with 12% of the population infected at any one time. There is little food. There are high levels of TB, dengue fever, sexually transmitted and waterborne diseases. Preventable illnesses such as diarrhoea are killing because the rural population has little or no access to basic healthcare. In a recent report, one of Thailand's senators, Jon Ungphakorn said "Forced relocation doubles the chance of childhood death and increases the risk of landmine injury by almost five times. Food insecurity not only increases the risk of malnutrition but also increases the chances of landmine injuries and malaria, as people are forced to forage in the jungles."

While millions continue to live in fear inside the country, others have fled into neighbouring Thailand, causing all manner of problems, not least because the country is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention relating to the status of refugees. Instead the Thai government uses the more narrow definition; 'a person fleeing fighting'. With thousands of Burmese trying to cross the border, it is often hard to distinguish between economic migrant, political asylum seeker and official refugee, and many enter the country illegally rather than risk rejection and consequent punishment by the Burmese authorities.

These 'illegal' migrants, mostly ethnic Karen, who manage to get over the border, cannot work legally, cannot apply for citizenship, and cannot return to Burma for fear of retribution. They can't access international assistance or request resettlement in another country - their only option is to live illegally. They do this by building shanty communities on the outskirts of towns and working as 'day workers' for Thai farmers and garment and gemstone factories. Or they scavenge rubbish from the municipal dump, or work in the thriving Thai sex industry. However they survive, their status ensures appalling working conditions and extremely low pay.

The Karen are the largest ethnic group to have been effected by the years of conflict in Burma. In total there are around 4 million of them, half of whom are living on the border with Thailand. Of these, only 150,000 are registered asylum seekers, housed in seven of the nine official refugee camps strung along the 2,500km border. Mae La is one such camp, established in 1984 some 8km from the border itself, which is home to around 46,000 refugees. Some of the Karen have been in Mae La for its entire 24 years and never left.

As officially-recognised refugees, the inhabitants of the camps are able to apply for resettlement to a third country, a tentative solution which the UNHCR is managing for the future safety of the Karen. After all, they can't go home, they can't stay here, they must go somewhere. But where? 150,000 is a large number of people to take in, feed and look after. Last year the US took 13,000 and is preparing to take an additional 14,000. Other Karen have been resettled in Norway, Sweden, New Zealand and Australia, but those are only the tip of a very deep iceberg.

And just because they can't go home to Burma, it doesn't mean that they're happy to go to any country that will take them. The benefits in different countries vary; where some will support new immigrants for more than a year, others expect the refugees to repay their airfares. Some countries are cold and wet in comparison to Burma, the food is not to their taste, and so on. Refugees wait until there are places available in the country of their choice, where their friends and family are, and why shouldn't they? Their only understanding of the world outside the camp borders is filtered by television and messages from those already relocated abroad, and not all reports are positive.

Assuming that third country relocation is the best option, the effect on the Karen as a society are likely to be devastating. English-speaking individuals are more likely to qualify for a place abroad, and these tend to be the better educated, often teachers, or dynamic individuals who have volunteered and been trained by NGOs. All this adds up to the dissolution of a people, succinctly summed up by a Karen teacher working on the border: "In Burma we are nothing. In Thailand we are nothing. As a people we cannot survive. We want to stay in our community, we want to grow as a people, but there is no chance of that here. We are just a small people, but if we are scattered around the world we can't grow together."

Luke, a Karen teacher living on the border, believes that intervention by the west is the only solution. "The UN needs to take clear and direct action against this war. It needs to take care of the IDPs [internally displaced people] and refugees; their education and future lives. They need to create a new country for us. It has to be fought with guns, not talking – the international community needs to take action and go to war with the SPDC." He also believes that China is the key. "China supplies a market for Burmese products where other nations will not trade with the SPDC. China is a wall against international action. The SPDC becomes stronger through exporting Burma's natural resources [gemstones, teak, oil, and those are just some of the legally traded goods], while the ethnic minorities have no resources at all. The countries with power all know about the situation in Burma, yet they do nothing, because it is a civil war. The UN needs to give us more attention."

Whose responsibility are these people? Burma is rejecting them in horrific and uncompromising terms, and so they pour over the border into a country that can't or won't take them in. Resettlement for some is happening slowly, as more developed countries shoulder a little of the burden, but is there a rational long-term solution?

NGO workers buzz around on mopeds in Mae Sot, a busy market town in the middle of the Thai/Burmese border. There are many small organisations here and the plethora of acronyms is confusing; BMWEC, COTE, SAW, KWO, and of course UNHCR. But what of the large charities you would expect? Unfortunately, the UN has its hands tied by the Thai government, and without its mandate, has limited scope in the area. You would expect a town bordering a bloody conflict zone to be crawling with the white uniforms of UN peacekeepers, but there are none in Mae Sot. Burma won't let them in, and Thailand doesn't want a international force controlling its border - it's only been stable for a short while itself, having experienced numerous coups in the post-war years.

While the UN can't interfere, large charities like Save The Children, UNICEF and so on can't have official status either, since presence in the border area would jeopardise their work inside Burma itself. International aid is conspicuous by its absence, leaving the growing migrant crisis to be managed by small NGOs working under the radar. The only help for the border community is the unofficial presence of a myriad of small programmes run by home-grown and western-aided organisations, who are doing their best. But they just don't have the resources to do a great deal.

It seems as if unofficially, the Thais are happy to put up with a certain number of Burmese migrants, much as we in Britain tolerate a certain number of illegal immigrants because they do the work we seem to be unwilling to do. If the Thai authorities gave these families official recognition they would be obliged to care for them (with the expense of employment rights, medical care, education and so on) and if they acknowledged their presence as illegal immigrants, they would have to send them back to Burma, at some cost and the risk of international condemnation. So the status quo, where small charities run around trying to plug the gaps, and the government does a good job looking after those it does recognise, works quite nicely thank you. Even the UNHCR is approving, "the Thai government is not signed up [to the 1951 Convention], but they are doing very well. This is some of the best refugee hosting going on in the world." says Yoshi Saitha, head of the Mae Sot UNHCR operation.

Turning a blind eye for now seems to suit the Thai government – if they really wanted to, they could make sure all the Burmese went home. But cheap labour, a busy border trade, the inevitable benefits of living next to a conflict zone mean that border towns like Mae Sot are thriving and growing.

Without China withdrawing its backing of the SPDC, there will likely be no change inside Burma. And that won't happen without huge pressure from the West. Which in turn won't happen because the West is unwilling to risk its fragile friendship with China, particularly right now in the face of global economic crisis. So Burma and the Burmese are stuck in a truly horrific situation and the only way out is little by little, as small independent charities like Children on the Edge do their best to school the next generation. As with so many societies in crisis, education may be the only way to a better future.

At the last count, some 700,000 people have been made homeless following Cyclone Nargis, while thousands of people have died. Much of this could have been prevented if the Burmese authorities had allowed greater contribution from the world's aid agencies, and many of the deaths to come will be preventable, human-caused, and the direct responsibility of the current regime.