

DIFFICULT LIVES

INTERVIEWS IN THE KACHIN STATE

Northern Burma

September 1991

o
o o
Project Maje
14 Dartmouth Rd.
Cranford NJ 07016 USA

Introduction

The eleven interviews in this report were conducted in a large village in the Kachin State (northern Burma) just across a river boundary from China. The village has been rapidly expanding in population since the 1980s, with a constant influx of internal refugees who flee there to avoid a series of campaigns by Burmese government troops. The refugee civilians consider the village a safe haven because it is under the control and administration of an anti-regime group, the Kachin Independence Organization, which has a formidable armed force, the Kachin Independence Army. Proximity to China may add to the residents' sense of security, but China has not allowed refugees to inhabit its side of the river border. The village is also a trading center, with a large marketplace in which Burmese, Chinese, and even Thai goods are for sale. Intrepid traders carry clothing, foodstuffs, and other items there from government-controlled parts of the Kachin State (particularly the cities, Bhamo and Myitkyina), and purchase Chinese merchandise to bring back.

The village has a current population of several hundred families, most of whom live in small bamboo and thatch huts. It is clean and well-maintained, with adequate sanitation facilities and a hydro-power generator running a rice-mill. The only hospital in the area is there, a military facility now serving civilians as well, since the civilian hospital was completely destroyed by a flash flood on June 22, 1991. A well-regarded school system, providing education up to high school graduation level, is well established in the village. This infrastructure is provided and supervised by KIO personnel. The stated goals of the KIO include cultural/political autonomy, equality for all ethnic groups, and democracy. At present the KIO administration is a military government, with considerable civilian input at the village level.

The area, in the eastern part of the Kachin State, is home to various ethnic groups: the Kachins (a group of tribes including the Jingpaw, Maru, Lisu, Lishi, Rawang, Nung, and Azi); Shans (related to the people of Thailand and Laos); Chinese; Burmese (the largest ethnic group of Burma); and Gurkhas (descendants of British Army soldiers from Nepal). The ethnic minority groups consider their very existence under attack by the Burmese-dominated government army. That army enforces the will of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), a junta which has, since suppressing a pro-democracy uprising in 1988, maintained the authoritarian rule forced on Burma by dictator Ne Win in 1962. As in all areas of Burma where rebel groups are active, in the Kachin State the SLORC's army wages counter-insurgency with attacks on civilian populations suspected of disloyalty. The scale and frequency of human rights abuse in the Kachin State is consistent with the pattern found everywhere else in Burma. Perhaps the most common abuse is forced labor: the conscription of civilians to serve as "porters" carrying army supplies in the war zone, without pay. In recent years this practice has extended to forced labor on army projects such as base construction, and even in profit-making ventures for the army, such as gem mining. The danger and mistreatment inherent in porter service engender hatred of the government among the civilians, and many flee to rebel held areas to escape it.

L

In addition to forced labor, the Kachin State civilians are constantly subjected to various forms of harassment, extortion, and severe abuse (torture, rape, killings) by the SLORC's troops. It has long been a practice of the Burmese regimes' military to forcibly relocate war-zone villages to areas near army garrisons. This has expanded since 1988 to encompass large-scale relocations of civilian populations. Entire villages, and even sections of cities, have been compelled to shift location. In the Kachin State, rural villages are being moved en masse to army-secured areas along the railway line. The relocated villagers are denied adequate provisions, and, having had to abandon their rice crops, face starvation. While these actions are probably taken to deny the rebel forces a civilian base of support, they appear ill thought out, with the same populations being shifted from place to place more than once. If the purpose is to starve and exhaust a population to the point of extermination, then it may be more efficient than it is as a counterinsurgency tactic.

The economy of the Kachin State is under severe strain. Warfare, relocations, and forced labor have all been detrimental to agricultural production. Some rice farmers have turned to growing opium; this is being prohibited by the KIO but is still permitted in SLORC-controlled areas. Drug abuse is a pervasive problem, with an accompanying AIDS epidemic spreading rapidly. Burmese currency, which has been demonetized in the past, is distrusted by the population, and the price of black market consumer goods (often the only goods available) is soaring. Despite this, the men and women who make a living trading sarongs, soybean cakes, soap and cigars, continue to brave the trails from town to border and back. The under-development enforced by SLORC policies has a detrimental effect on all aspects of the village's life. University educated schoolteachers, who took to the rebel zone after the 1988 uprising, struggle to teach their eager pupils with a few well-worn copies of "Wuthering Heights" and a dismal "Burma Socialist Program Party" economic textbook. The doctors who had built up a self-sufficient civilian hospital, since its loss in the flood must make do with an overcrowded and inadequately equipped military facility, to treat their huge civilian caseload.

Some of the interviewees could see nothing but continued darkness in the future; others expressed a remarkably buoyant optimism. Overall, morale in the rebel territory of the Kachin State is high, compared to other parts of Burma. While frustrated by isolation and poverty, the people there have a great faith in themselves and each other, and seem to feel that whatever kind of work they are doing, it will be productive in the end. They are extraordinarily willing to take political risks, like devoting professional skills to refugee villagers, faking a national identity card to vote for a pro-democracy opposition party, or simply answering the questions of one of the few outside observers to reach their area. Such commendable courage certainly deserves the interest and support of the outside world.

Interview 1: male.

Q: How old are you?

A: 45.

Q: What ethnic group are you?

A: Shan.

Q: What kind of work do you do?

A: I'm a farmer.

Q: Where were you born?

A: N~~~~.

Q: Do you live here now?

A: No, I came from N~~~~, to carry some things for trading in the market here.

Q: When did you come here?

A: This is the first time for me. Yesterday night I arrived.

Q: What is the situation in your home area like?

A: There's no problem now. Only sometimes the government army takes the porters.

Q: Were you ever taken as a porter, yourself?

A: I have been taken as a porter, sometimes.

Q: How long did they take you for?

A: One week.

Q: Did they give you any money for it?

A: No.

Q: Did they give you food and drinking water?

A: They gave us nothing.

Q: If somebody got sick, or couldn't walk very well, what happened to them?

A: They didn't give rice, so we had to carry our own. On the way, we had big, heavy burdens we had to bring. If we went slowly, they scold and beat us.

Q: What kind of things were you carrying?

A: The older porters carry rice rations, like that. The small boys carry the heavy ammunition.

Q: What kind of crops do you grow?

A: Mainly rice, paddy field. In summer and winter, some vegetables -- corn, mustard, cabbage, potatoes.

Q: Do the SLORC authorities ever ask you for part of the crop?

A: They don't ask for it.

Q: Do you pay any taxes?

A: Yes, the government buys some rice from the farmers, but if we have no good paddy field this year, if we don't have much rice, they don't make allowance for it. They say, "Oh, we get it." They take it anyway. And we have to buy some rice to give to the government. The price is very low that the government pays.

Q: In your area, do people also grow opium?

A: No.

Q: What is your hope for the future?

A: I have no hopes for the future. I can continue the way it is.

Interview 2: female

Q: How old are you?

A: 27.

Q: What ethnic group?

A: Maru.

Q: What place were you born in?

A: L~~~~.

Q: What kind of work do you do?

A: I'm a trader. I came here from Bhamo.

Q: When did you come here from Bhamo?

A: I started from Bhamo eight months ago.

Q: What was the situation like in Bhamo?

A: In Bhamo now, it is very difficult for the traders, the merchants. It is very difficult for people to go out trading anywhere. If the traders go out to buy and sell, the SLORC soldiers are on the riverboats, and some are on the way, we have to stop, they search our articles and ask where we go. They ask, "This kind of merchandise, where are you going with it?" They ask for money. They disturb the merchant traders in every way. So we feel very upset about it. A very difficult life.

Q: Was the price of goods going up or down?

A: This condition is not the same as the SLORC government announces. They say "The merchandise price is down low! Don't worry!" But this time condition is the opposite. It is not true what they announce. Sometimes we have to buy some longyis [sarongs] and sell at this market. This is the border, so Chinese currency and Burmese currency is not the same all the time. So sometimes we come from Bhamo, and the currency is one kind, but then we arrive here and the currency is low, so we lost money.

Q: When people buy things in the market here, do they use Chinese money or Burmese money?

A: Now mainly we sell and buy in Chinese currency. Because we don't believe the Burmese money. All of the people are afraid of Burmese currency. Mostly they are afraid to use the Burmese 200 kyat notes. Oh, they are very afraid! At Mandalay,

the people had to change like this: if Burmese currency, a 200 kyat note, they have to change to Chinese currency, they will not give 200 -- only 150.

Q: Right now, for one yuan of Chinese currency, how many kyats do you get?

A: Now one hundred kyats is equal to 5.5 yuan. [5.3 yuan = 1 US dollar].

Q: What kind of goods from China do they sell in the market here?

A: Now most of the merchandise comes from China. Because the SLORC government soldiers disturb in every way, so goods don't come clearly from the Burma side. So not many come from Burma, and most come from China. Everything like drinks, and some food, clothes, batteries, torchlights, some medicines, all are mostly from China.

Q: Do they sell anything from Thailand here?

A: Yes, but a little. Because the SLORC government, they take so much customs at the checkpoints. It's more for foreign articles.

Q: How do things come here from Thailand?

A: Mostly they come from the Thai border to Mandalay, and from Mandalay to Bhamo by riverboat. If you have much merchandise, you must pay a lot of tax.

Q: In 1988, when they had the democracy movement in Burma, were you in Bhamo at that time?

A: Yes, I was in Bhamo.

Q: Did they have demonstrations in Bhamo?

A: Yes. At the time, the SLORC government didn't disturb the demonstrations, but they watched carefully to see who are the leaders. When the demonstrations were finished, all the leaders from the democracy demonstrations were arrested. Except some are running away and they go and live now in the KIO [Kachin Independence Organization] controlled area.

Q: Did you vote in the 1990 election?

A: Yes. For Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD [National League for Democracy].

Q: In Bhamo is there any problem with people taking heroin?

A: Oh! The government announces they don't allow heroin, to smoke or to shoot, or to sell. But if they catch them, to smoke or to shoot, or to sell, the police just ask them for money. So if they get money, it's free to do. Some have to have more money to give the SLORC government, so they have to sell more heroin.

Q: Have you heard anything in Bhamo about AIDS?

A: Yes, some people are ill with AIDS disease. Not so many.

Q: What do ^{you} hope for in the future?

A: For the future, I can try to do business. And I can help the people who are very poor in our ethnic group, and to help our revolution army. I can try more and more.

Interview 3: male

Q: How old are you?

A: 39.

Q: What ethnic group are you from?

A: Shan.

Q: Where were you born?

A: In N~~~~~~~~, near Bhamo.

Q: What kind of work do you do?

A: Farmer.

Q: What crops do you grow?

A: Rice, beans, groundnuts, mustard.

Q: Do the government authorities ever ask you for some of your rice crop?

A: Yes. The government has a rice quota, they give the lowest price for. They take it from the farmer.

Q: Do you have enough rice to give to the government and also for your family?

A: The government, we farmers have to share with them. If we are growing rice six acres, we must sell 20 baskets. But if we have a not good crop this year, they don't care. They take it all. So it's very difficult to buy some other rice.

Q: Do the farmers in your area raise livestock, and do they sell them on the China border?

A: We don't have buffalos to sell in my area.

Q: Did you ever have problems with the government authorities?

A: Yes. The SLORC government goes to operations every year and takes porters. They wanted to take me as porter, but I can't go because I can't walk carrying a big basket, so I had to pay money. 500 and 600 kyats each time.

Q: In your area, have the authorities moved any villages?

A: Now the farmer's life is very difficult to grow paddy fields. Now the farmers have only started to plant the seeds, and at that time the SLORC government gathers all the villagers from here to there. So for most of the farmers it is now very difficult to grow the crops.

Q: What is your hope for the future?

A: I don't know. I just think things will become even worse than they are now.

Interview 4: female

Q: How old are you?

A: 23.

Q: What ethnic group?

A: Jingpaw.

Q: Where were you born?

A: T~~~~~, a mountain village.

Q: When did you come here?

A: Now I've stayed here for three months.

Q: What work do you do?

A: Trading.

Q: What was the situation in your home town before you came here?

A: In the village, the SLORC government, every time they took porters. Until there were no men and boys in the village. They took all to be porters! And in Shwebo district there's a ruby mine, the SLORC government has secured, and they took porters to work in the mines. So all of the villagers now they feel very great trouble.

Q: When they took people to work in the mine, how long did they keep them?

A: It depends on the work. It may take five days, ten days, sometimes one month.

Q: Do the authorities give them any money or food?

A: They give nothing.

Q: Did the government army give any trouble to the women in your village?

A: Yes, some did. I myself had to serve as a porter.

Q: In your trading business, do you have any problem with the authorities?

A: It's very difficult to pass their posts. All the time they are checking. At some checkpoints we are forced to give some money.

Q: Do they checkpoints have a set amount of tax?

A: It's not official, their demands for money. It's just like a bribe.

Q: What kind of goods did you bring here to sell?

A: I usually bring some clothing and some edible things.

Q: When you buy (Burmese) longyis to sell here, how much does one cost?

A: I buy one for 170 kyats, and I sell it here for 200 kyats. But profit is not the real profit -- we spend so much in between.

Q: Will you buy some Chinese things here to bring back?

A: I can't, it's too expensive.

Q: What is your hope for the future?

A: For the time being, I'll continue with my trading.

Interview 5: female

Q: How old are you?

A: 30.

Q: From what ethnic group?

A: Shan.

Q: Where were you born?

A: Near Bhamo.

Q: What kind of work do you do?

A: My business is trading.

Q: When did you come here?

A: Yesterday.

Q: Did you come from Bhamo, yesterday?

A: No, from my village.

Q: What kind of goods did you bring to sell here?

A: Clothes and food.

Q: What is the situation in your village regarding the SLORC authorities?

A: There are problems. They take people for porters, and they have to do some work for them. If they cannot carry things, they beat them. And they don't give them food.

Q: Besides portering, what kind of work do they take people for?

A: They make them build military compounds and barracks.

Q: In your area, do the SLORC authorities ever move villages?

A: No, not there.

Q: On your way here, did any soldiers stop you?

A: I got a ticket from the SLORC checkpoint. I paid five kyats for it.

Q: How did the soldiers at the checkpoint speak to you?

A: They told us to sign the paper, the pass, and along the road we show it to military personnel.

Q: What do you hope for in the future?

A: My interest is only my trading business.

Interview 6: male

Q: How old are you?

A: 38.

Q: What ethnic group are you from?

A: Gurkha.

Q: Where were you born?

A: In ~~~~~ Below Myitkyina.

Q: When did you arrive here?

A: Ten days ago.

Q: What kind of work do you do?

A: Farming, and raising some cattle.

Q: Why did you come here?

A: The SLORC soldiers were chasing me, so I escaped here.

Q: Why were they trying to arrest you?

A: They thought I was one of the KIA's [Kachin Independence Army] men.

Q: How did you know that the SLORC was looking for you?

A: Because my wife gave birth to a child fourteen days ago. After the delivery, the SLORC military post detained my wife and baby. And I got the news when she arrived from there. That they were searching for me, and they couldn't find me, so they took my wife and baby. They were released and stay at home now.

Q: Did you have to give some of your rice crop to the government?

A: We were forced to give paddy last year. And this year I cannot do this paddy growing, because I am just escaping.

Q: Why did the SLORC soldiers think that you were a KIA man?

A: Because I was always coming and going around this area. So they suspected that I gave some information. But I was going around for my own business.

Q: What religion are you?

A: Buddhist.

Q: Do the authorities make any problems for the Gurkha people in your area?

A: Yes. We suffer so many tortures. In my village, one of the Gurkhas was just going to gather some bamboo and wood, and the SLORC military personnel met him in the jungle and they took him, and broke his jaw. Just like that, we suffered so many troubles. They always take Gurkhas for porters. If we don't go, they beat us. If we cannot go as porters, we must pay 3,000 kyats for one man.

Q: Did your father always live in Burma, or did he come from Nepal?

A: My father is also born in Kachin State. My grandfather came from Nepal. He was in the British Army.

Q: Do you have to have a special ethnic registration or identity card?

A: Yes. We have the "foreigner's registration card."

Q: When they had the national election in 1990, could you vote in it?

A: I got a national identity card. It was not given by the authorities. We gave some bribes to get it. So we could use it to go and vote for the NLD.

Q: What do you hope for in the future?

A: If in Burma there will be the real democracy, then I can do many things for my life.

Interview 7: male

Q: How old are you?

A: 36.

Q: What is your ethnic group?

A: Gurkha. [brother of interviewee #6]

Q: What kind of work do you do?

A: Farming.

Q: What kind of crops do you grow?

A: Paddy crops, groundnuts, mustard. And raising cattle.

Q: Where do you sell the cattle?

A: We wait at our home, and the men who want to buy them come there.

Q: Has the price you get for your cattle gone up or down?

A: It's been going up.

Q: Do you have to pay any tax to the authorities when you sell your cattle?

A: When we are going to sell the cows, we have to go to the SLORC people and tell them, "I want to sell this cow." And we give tax, three percent -- officially. But they ask according to their wish.

Q: Is your farm in the valley or hillside?

A: The flat place.

Q: Do any people in your area grow opium?

A: No, they don't.

Q: Were you able to vote in the election last year?

A: Yes, I got some national card so I could vote.

Q: Did you ever work as a porter for the government troops?

A: I have been a porter many, many times.

Q: What kind of things did you carry?

A: I carried some arms and ammunition. And some clothes.

Q: Did they give you money or food?

A: The SLORC army men did not give money or food. We went as porters on our own expense.

Q: How long did they keep you as a porter?

A: Duration varied from time to time. Sometimes around about three weeks. The longest period was about three months.

Q: Did you go to any place where there was fighting, or mines in the ground, when you were a porter?

A: Once I had an experience like that, there was shooting and six people died, and the SLORC army men said to the porter men, "It's KIA we killed." But we went and observed it and we think it was really just villagers, it's not like KIA, no uniform. Just villagers. I also heard about some other porters, the SLORC army men forced these porters in front of their positions, I think the army men want to use these porters to test for the mines.

Q: How many children do you have?

A: Three. And my brother has seven.

Q: What is your hope for the future?

A: We are afraid of staying in our village. We've got to shift someplace where we've got some security.

Interview 8: female

Q: How old are you?

A: 29.

Q: What ethnic group?

A: Jingpaw.

Q: What is your profession?

A: Doctor in maternity surgery.

Q: Are you in the Kachin Independence Army?

A: Yes.

Q: Your rank?

A: Lieutenant.

Q: Where were you educated?

A: In Myitkyina up to Fifth standard, then transferred to another town up to Seventh standard. After passing Seventh standard, I joined KIA.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in N~~~~, near Myitkyina.

Q: When did you come here?

A: I arrived here in 1990.

Q: Here, in your hospital, what kind of cases are you treating mostly?

A: Since our instruments are not complete, we cannot do operations now. The most common disease is malaria.

Q: In the maternity cases, are there often problems here?

A: Most babies lack proper nutrition. Babies are underweight. This is the biggest problem we are facing here.

Q: Do people here practice birth control?

A: We have no birth control here.

Q: Have you seen any cases of AIDS?

A: I don't know, exactly, because we have no instruments to check blood.

Q: Is the KIO doing anything to educate people about AIDS, and is your hospital doing anything to prevent AIDS?

A: For the time being we have no program for the defense against AIDS. But if we have instruments and apparatus, we can set up the program.

Q: Have you had to treat any people for drug addiction?

A: We have. Some persons are heroin addicts or opium addicts.

Q: What's the best thing about your work?

A: I am optimistic, and I will keep trying until we get independence.

Interview 9: female

Q: How old are you?

A: 42.

Q: What is your ethnic group?

A: Jingpaw.

Q: What is your profession? A: Maternity doctor.

Q: Are you in the KIA?

A: Yes.

Q: What is your rank?

A: Lieutenant.

Q: Where were you educated?

A: In a village about 24 miles from Myitkyina. I got my medical education first in the "Triangle" area [far north of Kachin State] and then I continued to get my doctor's degree in China.

Q: Where were you born?

A: In the Shan State.

Q: When did you come here?

A: In 1985.

Q: When you first came here, were there many people living here?

A: Yes, many.

Q: When did most people start coming here?

A: I don't know exactly, but when I arrived here, there were many people here already.

Q: What kind of sicknesses and injuries do you see most at the hospital?

A: The most common is malaria. And some cholera. And when there is a battle between our troops and the enemy troops, there are some wounded soldiers, they are also treated here.

Q: Is the malaria here ever fatal?

A: Yes, so many die due to malaria.

Q: What kind of war wounds are there?

A: Some are wounded due to bombing. Some, we have to amputate their legs and hands.

Q: Before, there was another hospital in the area. What happened to that hospital?

A: That hospital was destroyed in the flood.

Q: Are there supplies that your hospital doesn't have enough of?

A: There are many medicines of which there are not enough.

Q: In this area, is oral rehydration mix used?

A: Yes.

Q: What's the best thing about the work you do?

A: I think we will see better conditions in the future.

Interview 10: female

Q: How old are you?

A: I'm 24.

Q: What is your ethnic group?

A: Jingpaw.

Q: What is your profession?

A: I'm a teacher.

Q: Are you in the Kachin Independence Organization?

A: Yes, I am.

Q: Where were you educated?

A: I started in Myitkyina, until I passed high school, then I joined Mandalay University.

Q: What subject were you studying at Mandalay University?

A: International Relations and International Administration.

Q: Where were you born?

A: I was born in Bhamo.

Q: When did you come here?

A: In 1989.

Q: Why did you come here?

A: I serve in this area.

Q: When did you join the KIO?

A: In 1989, June.

Q: During the democracy movement of 1988, where were you?

A: At that time, I lived at home, Myitkyina.

Q: Were there demonstrations in Myitkyina then?

A: Yes!

Q: Were you demonstrating?

A: Yes. Sometimes I took part.

Q: What were people saying then?

A: They said, "We want democracy, we want democracy."

Q: What happened in Myitkyina in September 1988?

A: At that time I was in Mandalay. The Mandalay people were demonstrating. They started in March. Last year, monks and students still demonstrated.

Q: What subjects do you teach at the school here?

A: I teach English and Economics.

Q: How many students do you teach?

A: I teach nearly 100.

Q: When your students finish the highest standard here, what do they do after that?

A: After this, some are joining the Seminary -- Bible school. Some are serving in KIO.

Q: What's the best thing about the work that you do?

A: I'm very interested in my work, and I serve my country as much as possible.

Q: What's the worst thing about your work?

A: Our lack of school teaching aids, and school books, and so many other things.

Q: In the future, what do you hope for?

A: In the future I hope to get my college degree.

Interview 11: male

Q: How old are you?

A: 26.

Q: What is your ethnic group?

A: Jingpaw.

Q: What is your profession?

A: My profession is teaching English in high school.

Q: Where were you educated?

A: I changed from town to town, until I passed high school in Myitkyina. Then I joined Rangoon Institute of Technology.

Q: What subject were you studying there?

A: Mining engineering.

Q: Why did you go to so many schools as a child?

A: My father was an officer of the Immigration Department.

Q: Are you a member of any organization?

A: ABSDF [All Burma Students' Democratic Front].

Q: When did you come here?

A: I came here in 1988.

Q: Why did you come here at that time?

A: I took part in the September demonstrations. I had to leave Myitkyina.

Q: Were you in the demonstrations in Rangoon as well?

A: I took part there in March 1988. Then in September I came up to Myitkyina. I had a lot of experience in political views then.

Q: In September 1988, in Myitkyina, what happened?

A: We lost our hold for democracy.

