

Burma: The Next Killing Fields?

By Alan Clements

Written December 1990

Chapter Four

DEATH AND LIFE IN MANERPLAW

Bangkok is one of the most exciting cities in Asia, a sprawling metropolis that pulses to its own manic rhythms. Outside my hotel the street swarmed with taxis and an all-night market threw its phosphorescent glow against my window shades. The night was hot – every night in Bangkok is hot – and the low throbbing of the hotel's air conditioner filled my room with a long, sustained sigh.

I couldn't sleep. For hours I lay fully dressed upon my bed, completely restless but uninterested in the distractions available just outside my room. My visit to Burma had moved me profoundly; I would never forget the whispered conversations, or the pall of fear and helplessness that lay like smog over the land. I was staggered by the suffering I'd encountered and awed by the fact that so many people had been willing, even eager, to risk their lives by speaking with me.

But my two-day reconnaissance of Rangoon, under the myopic eye of SLORC, had only amplified my desire to understand the real story behind the people's struggle for national independence. Clearly, this could never be accomplished under the conditions imposed during my recent visit.

Frustration gave way to anger; and anger, at last, to an unwavering sense of conviction. I wouldn't leave Southeast Asia until I'd met, face to face, with the democratic forces camped along the Thai-Burmese border.

The next morning, underground dissident students helped me arrange an illegal, two-week visit to northeastern Burma. The route into the rugged mountain areas spanned hundreds of miles and was fraught with danger. We would be entering a war zone where thousands of SLORC's most seasoned guerrillas were attacking democratic forces.

My Burmese student guide, our Thai driver and I sped through the night towards a border town 300 miles northwest of Bangkok. Our final destination was Manerplaw – the remote jungle headquarters of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF), located along the Moei River in an area of Burma under the control of the armed forces of the Karen National Union (KNU).

The ABSDF was born in the jungle in November 1988, after the summer massacres in Rangoon, Mandalay and other cities. Of the original 10,000 high school and university students who had fled from the cities, fewer than 3,000 remain. These men and women, now living in primitive camps scattered through 700 miles of mountainous terrain, are among the most outspoken enemies of SLORC tyranny. Fighting alongside the Karen soldiers, they help keep the democratic hopes of their nation alive.

The dramatic decrease in the students' ranks had numerous causes. Lacking the natural immunities of the local population, many died of malaria, dysentery, cholera or malnutrition. Others had been captured by SLORC soldiers. Some had been drafted into service as military

porters, a job they held until they died of exhaustion.

Still other students had slipped back into Burma's urban centers, overcome by the extreme hardship of life in the jungle. They were in hiding, not even daring to contact their families. Other escaped dissidents remained concealed within Thailand, where they're considered illegal aliens by the Thai government and are subject to arrest and deportation if caught.

In the past, Thailand had been more charitable. When thousands of Burmese students had begun pouring across the border after the August 1988 massacre, Thai authorities ignored SLORC's demand that they be repatriated and granted them asylum. But after the commander-in-chief of the Thai army, General Chaowalit, visited Rangoon in December 1988, the situation reversed.

Chaowalit set up a repatriation center near the Burmese border and pleaded over radio and television for all Burmese students inside Thailand "to resume their studies and become good citizens." The general repeated SLORC's pledge that the students' safety would be guaranteed. Those who believed the announcement met a disastrous fate, as Amnesty International reported:

Nine returning students were arrested by soldiers...and taken to a military camp where four of them were allegedly beheaded.... In another case...fifteen university students, including three women, were executed after they were captured on their way home from the border areas. The three young women were repeatedly gang-raped before being killed.

As we pressed ahead toward the Burmese border, my 20-year-old guide summarized the aspirations of the Burmese resistance. "People all over Burma want to live freely," he said matter-of-factly. "This was made clear by the elections. We want democracy, for the people and by the people. That means human rights, freedom from brutality, being able to walk, breathe and think without the fear of being taken by soldiers at any time of the day or night."

Later in the journey, I listened intently as he recounted an experience he had during one of the marches.

At the time of the demonstrations, I was an English major in my last year at Rangoon University. I had my hopes set on moving to the countryside and teaching English to the village children.

When the demonstrations started, I knew that this was our moment. Aung San Suu Kyi inspired us to stand up for our rights and to speak our conscience. Together with most of my classmates, I joined in the demonstrations. Several of my younger brothers and sisters wanted to come out and march too.

He took a deep breath and continued with difficulty.

None of us had any idea what would follow. It was September 1988, just before SLORC seized power. We were marching in the afternoon – hundreds of thousands of us. My 15-year-old sister had her arm through mine. My younger brother, who was 11, was holding her hand.

Up ahead the troops suddenly appeared with their guns pointed at us. We were unarmed and walking peacefully – and then the shooting started. All I heard was screams and gunfire. Hundreds of people in front of me fell to the pavement. My sister and I began to run, until her limp body knocked me over. She had been hit. I watched as she bled to death within a few seconds.

My little brother was in shock at seeing his sister dead. He kept hugging her and wailing. But we hadn't a moment to stop, so I grabbed his hand and ran. Just a few feet later he was shot

in the back of the head. I began to scream. I picked his body up in my arms and continued running. I knew he was dead yet I kept running, all the while screaming aloud.

Once in the nearby village, I lay in the dirt beneath the floor of a small hut, my brother's bloodied body on the ground next to me. I was crying desperately, but dared not make a sound. The soldiers ran by along the foot path. Only when it got dark did I dare to leave. We buried my brother near our home. My sister's body was never found. The next day I left Rangoon and, along with many friends, began the trek into the jungle.

Arriving at a town near the border at 3 a.m., we changed to a four-wheel-drive truck. We picked up several other ABSDF members, packed medical supplies, blankets and food provisions, and drove on into the dawn.

As we drew closer to SLORC's front lines, I noticed a gradual change in my perceptions. Perhaps it was only my projected anxiety, but the lush jungle mountains began to lose their enchanting beauty. It was becoming clear, intuitively, that we were entering a war zone.

As we drove, my escort pointed out Burmese villages just across the river that had been burned and destroyed. Sometimes SLORC would conduct a public torturing of local villagers in order to terrify their fellows into submission.

That had happened, he said, in a village called Chaungson. A monastery there, run by a respected abbot, provided shelter and help to the needy students, the local Mon and Karen people, even soldiers from the Burmese Army.

One afternoon a group of SLORC soldiers arrived at the monastery. They seized the abbot and began torturing him. The monk was stripped and his body sliced with knives. The soldiers filled the bleeding wounds with salt before tying the naked abbot to a tree. The local people were forced to watch the monk suffering; those who cried or reacted in any way were kicked and beaten by the soldiers.

By now the sun was high. We continued in silence until my Burmese companion abruptly told the driver to stop the truck. He then motioned for me to get out. "I want to show you something; over there," he said, pointing up ahead.

We walked down a narrow path through dense foliage. After a few minutes, we entered a vast open space. "This," my companion said, "is a 'teak barn'." It was a flat clearing, nearly a square mile in area, filled with thousands of logs.

There are many such "teak barns," most of them owned by Thai military officers under contract with SLORC. They're part of a multimillion dollar lumber and logging operation that clears teak forests deep within Burma, transports the wood to Thailand for milling and sells the products on the international market.

The United Nations Development Programme issued a report in July 1991 which stated the extent of this devastation. Recent satellite photographs show that an area larger than the state of Massachusetts is being cleared each year. As a result, Burma now has the fifth highest deforestation rate on the planet. Since it has virtually no reforestation plans, the country will be denuded within fifteen years. The lush rainforests along the Thai-Burmese border may not last another five.

It's easy to understand why SLORC is trying to crush the democracy movement. But why is it raping Burma's exquisite environment?

When the Burmese military suppressed all dissent in September 1988, the United States suspended aid to the regime. Japan and the European Community followed. The military junta had to find other means of financing its operations, so it began selling off Burma's natural resources – mostly teak, fish, oil and tin.

"The cynicism of the Burmese regime has, regrettably, found ready partners amongst Burma's neighbors," US Senator Daniel Moynihan told Congress.

A large number of Thai companies...have, with the cooperation of the Thai government, signed concessions to cut millions of tons of logs inside Burma.... Firms from other countries, including Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore and Europe, have reportedly participated in the teak concession bonanza in Burma. In addition, at least 15 fishing concessions, worth over \$17 million, have gone to Japanese, Thai, Malaysian, Singaporean, Australian and South Korean fishing companies.

The money from these concessions will not help ordinary Burmese.... Rather, the profits will prolong the life of the current government and equip the Burmese military for yet more violence.

Multimillion dollar deals with SLORC oligarchs have also been made by Western oil companies – including Amoco and Unocal in the US, PetroCanada, and BHP of Australia. US multinational corporations have invested over \$125 million in SLORC's economy since 1989 alone.

Actively wooing increased US investment, SLORC hired Van Kloberg Associates, a Washington DC public relations firm, "to improve its image in the United States and hopefully attract lucrative US business investment."

Van Kloberg has a distinguished portfolio. The firm's other clients have included Saddam Hussein, the infamous Liberian military leader Samuel K. Doe and former Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. Van Kloberg himself was reported as saying that former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke's defeat in the Louisiana governor's race was "a pity" and that freeing Poland from German control after WWII "should never have happened."

SLORC's profits from legal exports pale in comparison to its earnings from Burma's real cash crop—opium. There's evidence that Burma supplies a majority of the heroin sold in the US, and that SLORC has played a major role in doubling Burma's opium production to more than 2200 tons a year.

SLORC has also permitted Burmese drug barons to build heroin refineries, a far more lucrative business than merely harvesting and exporting the product. Bertil Lintner, a political expert on Burma and writer for the Far Eastern Economic Review, says he has photographs of SLORC military trucks carrying the chemicals needed to process opium into heroin.

The US Congressional Record reports that, in September 1991, Chinese and SLORC troops descended on the border town of Wanting and ordered people to stay in their homes. Shortly thereafter, two convoys of military trucks rumbled into the village – one from China, the other from inside Burma. Soldiers then exchanged loads of Chinese arms for Burmese heroin.

China is actively strengthening its ties with Burma. In September 1990, it agreed to sell SLORC \$1.2 billion in arms. The shipment included eleven Soviet-made jets, numerous gun boats, about a hundred tanks, dozens of anti-aircraft guns, rocket launchers and assault rifles. Since Burma has no external enemies, the only possible use for such weapons is against the country's own citizenry.

There's also evidence that both police and military officials are profiting from brothel gangs that operate in Burma and Thailand. This isn't as well documented as the heroin trade but, according to UNICEF, at least 40,000 young Burmese women and children have been sold into Thailand's infamous sex industry. The girls are imprisoned within brothels and become the property of their owners. They are often forced to serve up to 20 clients a day and run a high risk of contracting AIDS.

An article in *The Australian*, a national newspaper, described the fate that befell some of these girls in 1991. Thai authorities had rescued 25 Burmese women, aged between 18 and 35, from a brothel in southern Thailand. All were HIV positive. The girls mysteriously "disappeared" once they were repatriated, and it was later reported that they were taken from their homes in Burma and given lethal cyanide injections.

Former Australian Human Rights Commissioner, Justice Einfeld, describes how "the Burmese Government...gave the go-ahead to inject with cyanide thousands of female prostitutes affected with the HIV virus in the hope of eradicating the disease from the country."

The setting sun was hard in our eyes as we bumped along mountainous dirt tracts. At last we skidded to a stop beside a small log bridge that had collapsed. Below, wedged into the ruins of the bridge, lay a large truck.

Turning around would mean a seven-hour detour, so we decided to hike the final five miles into the jungle. It wasn't a thrilling prospect, but we had no choice. We trekked for hours, following the pale beam of a single flashlight. The jungle creaked and whispered ominously. I heaved a sigh of relief when, utterly exhausted, we heard the Moei River flowing just ahead.

We bathed, ate the cooked rice we had brought along and wrapped ourselves in our clothes to gain what protection we could from the swarms of mosquitoes. I fell asleep under the stars.

At sunrise I was captivated by the beauty of the area. The sky was fiery orange, marbled with pastel blue. A range of jagged majestic peaks was straddled by clouds. Both banks of the Moei were shrouded in dense, deep rain forest, echoing with the calls of exotic birds. A few hundred yards downriver, a small herd of water buffalo bathed at the river's edge.

Despite appearances, this was no Shangri-La. I had arrived in one of the most war-ravaged regions of the world. At any moment the idyllic dawn could be shattered by a sudden air attack, or the hacking sound of rifle fire.

Although I was worried for my own safety, my visit would be brief, and I had an American passport. Barring a fatal ambush, I'd be back in the US in time for Christmas. The lives of my companions – and the tens of thousands of other refugees in the area—were in much greater danger.

Even now, all three of my companions appeared incredibly weak and were sweating profusely. As we climbed into the riverboat that would take us the final two hours down river to Manerplaw, two of them began to vomit. Only then did I learn that they, like all of the other students I was to meet in the jungle, had malaria. During many of the nights to come, bunked with dozens of students in makeshift shelters, I was kept awake by their retching groans.

After passing through numerous Karen military checkpoints, we arrived at the headquarters of the ABSDF in Manerplaw. The deplorable living conditions of the exiled students were immediately obvious. Shelters were generally small, open-sided bamboo huts. Blankets were scarce and personal items nonexistent.

Meals consisted mainly of white rice and liquid fish sauce, with an occasional fried egg shared four ways. Medicines were rare, as was suitable drinking water. The river was the only source, and for three months of the year the monsoon churns it into a filthy torrent. In spite of all this, and a recently intercepted transmission revealing SLORC's plans to bomb within the next few days, spirits were high.

The two weeks I spent with these Burmese students – working in the infirmary, sharing simple meals and discussing the hopes for their country – were among the most meaningful of my life. It was particularly inspiring to meet several young men in the camp whom I'd known as

monks, years before, in Rangoon. Deciding, at least for the moment, that direct action was more important than silent meditation, they had disrobed and joined the resistance after the uprisings.

One evening I was speaking with a dignified 29-year-old Burmese woman, a university graduate who'd fled her home after the uprisings of 1988. As we sat under the night sky, with a small candle burning between us, we discussed the principle of nonviolence: How can it be effective against an oppressor like SLORC, which tortures and kills unarmed civilians? At what point is self-defense necessary, if only to survive?

In the near distance we could hear soft guitar music and the voices of students singing love songs – a nightly occurrence. Groups of students would gather and walk with guitars, stopping at the huts of resting fellow students. As we listened to the music, I spontaneously asked my companion if she'd ever been in love. She paused for some time and regarded me evenly.

Yes, I have been in love. Two and a half years ago my fiancé and I were to have been married. We loved each other very much. We had known each other from childhood.

This was in 1988. But the demonstrations began only two weeks before our wedding. It was an incredible moment in our lives. We so desperately wanted freedom and democracy. The moment had come when we thought it would be possible to come out from under the boot of military oppression that had trampled us since we were young children.

First we went out and marched. The next day my sister and brothers came out with us. The following day my mother and father came out, then my aunts and uncles, until my whole family was in the streets. Suddenly, from nowhere, the soldiers appeared. They grouped together in three long rows with their automatic weapons and bayonets aimed at us. We in turn, many thousands of us, knelt down in front of the soldiers. We sang to them, "We love you; you are our brothers. All we want is freedom. You are the people's army; come to our side.... All we want is democracy."

But they had orders to fire, and they did. Many students, some friends and some of my family members were shot dead on the spot. We had no idea that our own people would kill us. I was terrified. I could scarcely believe it was actually happening. There was blood everywhere and loud screams, and the cracking of gunfire echoed loudly. Everyone panicked and ran for cover. People began falling down everywhere – a young friend of mine died in my arms. I looked for my family. They were gone. My fiancé and I began to run.

The soldiers rose from their positions and began to chase us. We ran for shelter, but the soldiers continued to pursue us. There was more firing and more people began to fall as they were shot in the back. Still we went on running. We scattered and ran into the forest and on into an outlying village. But the soldiers were right behind us, so we had to keep on running.

We ran ever deeper into the forest. We couldn't see, stumbling everywhere, cut, scraped and scared. Still we were chased into the night. We huddled together in the trees, frightened that the soldiers would catch us and kill us without mercy.

We went on running for the next two weeks, deeper and deeper into the jungle. I was still with my fiancé, along with a dozen other students, and we miraculously managed to evade the soldiers. Sometimes we had to bury ourselves under leaves, cling to the banks of rivers, or stand rigidly behind trees as soldiers passed by.

We felt like animals being hunted, sleeping sporadically on the forest floor. It was cold and unbearably painful. We were constantly bitten by ants and mosquitoes. Yet, we managed to stay alive.

After two weeks of running, nearing exhaustion, we all contracted malaria. We were

extremely weak, feverish and nauseated. That night the soldiers ambushed us. It was to have been the day of our marriage – instead, my fiancé and I were separated during the firefight.

I have never seen or heard from him since that night. I don't even know if he's alive or not. I dare not contact his family or my family, because it would put them in great danger if SLORC found out. If they're not already dead, that is.

We sat without stirring. The candle flickered in a temporary breeze and time seemed suspended. "I still think about him," she said. "I do miss him sometimes. But being out here in the jungle for these past few years, living under the tyranny, my values have changed. My love is now of a different order. I'm in love with freedom. And even if I'm caught and tortured to death, if it will help restore freedom in my country, I will die in love.

"Yes, I have been in love," she said softly. "And I remain in love."

On December 18, 1990, my last day in the jungle, an important event took place. Dr. Sein Win (sane WIN) and eight cabinet members (who were among the few democratic leaders who'd avoided capture and imprisonment by SLORC) risked their lives to make the rugged, five-day journey to Manerplaw. They brought momentous news.

At secret meetings in Mandalay and Rangoon, Burma's elected representatives and leaders of various minority organizations had decided to form a Burmese government-in-exile. Sein Win had been appointed its first prime minister.

After arriving in Manerplaw, Sein Win and his colleagues entered further negotiations with ethnic groups, students and monks, all of whom agreed to unite under a common banner. Such a show of solidarity would, they hoped, help them win recognition from the nations of the world.

In a crude wooden meeting hall crammed with foreign correspondents, Sein Win announced the new National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma. Everyone knew this bold step would have serious repercussions. The formation of a parallel government was SLORC's worst fear, and we all feared they'd turn Burma into a sea of blood before they'd tolerate such a challenge.

During my final night in Manerplaw, I wandered around the isolated camp. Walking barefoot along the moist dirt path, I could see the dim glow of a kerosene lantern from the camp infirmary ahead. There, in a makeshift medical tent, I met a student suffering from a severe case of malaria.

Despite the cold night air he was sweating, lying nearly unconscious with an IV needle in his arm. He had a fever of 105 and had begun urinating blood.

The young man's friend was standing beside him. "Malaria's not the only thing that's wrong with him." He lifted his friend's blanket – the boy's leg had been blown off. He lifted his shirt – there were bullet wounds in his neck and arm. A raw shrapnel scar, ten inches wide, sliced across his chest.

The boy was fifteen years old; he'd been a ninth grader in Rangoon before fleeing into the jungle after his brother and sister were killed in the August 8 massacre.

Struggling to speak, he whispered to me, "I hope you have learned how precious freedom is by your visit to the jungle. Please tell your people the truth of my people's situation. We want democracy and we need help. Please. We need it now."

The boy himself was beyond help; he died the next day. Yet as I recall him, lying on a bed of wooden planks, my memory focuses not on his awful wounds but on the blood-stained T-shirt he was wearing when he died. It read, "Our heads are bloodied, but they are held high."

To excerpt “Instinct for Freedom,” interview the author, or for foreign rights contact:

Alan Clements
Telephone: 1-604-251-1781
www.everydayrevolution.org
Email: contact@worldddharma.com

Additional books by Alan Clements
The Voice of Hope - Conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi,
Burma’s imprisoned Nobel peace laureate (Seven Stories, NY).