

Burma: The Next Killing Fields?

By Alan Clements

December 1990

Chapter Five

RETURN TO THE JUNGLE

1991 brought both bad and good news. In August, I learned that the friend who had escorted me to Manerplaw nearly a year ago, along with over 40 other Burmese students, had been captured and imprisoned by Thai immigration police.

While in detention, my friend had been beaten unconscious by the police. He sustained multiple fractures and numerous other injuries to the face, head and body. On finishing his jail term, he was forcibly returned to Burma. There, he and his comrades were no doubt imprisoned, tortured and probably executed by SLORC.

One ray of light did, however, penetrate Burma's continuing darkness. On December 10th, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The official statement read, "The Norwegian Nobel committee wishes to honor this woman for her unflagging efforts and to show its support for the many people throughout the world who are striving to attain democracy, human rights and ethnic conciliation by peaceful means."

In February 1992, while preparing the manuscript for this book, I received an unsettling report. Major General Khin Nyunt, appearing on Burmese television, had declared that SLORC was about to launch a major military offensive. Their objective was to overrun Manerplaw and crush the democratic resistance once and for all.

As SLORC troops descended upon Manerplaw, horror stories began flooding out of Burma. In January, 700 Muslim youths died of suffocation after being herded into warehouses. SLORC troops had opened fire inside a mosque, killing 200 Muslims at prayer. Muslim women were being gang-raped and left to bleed to death, while their crying children were thrown on the roadside. Half a million Kachins had their homes and villages destroyed. It seemed that SLORC was preparing for all-out genocide.

The stories were carried by a vast flood of refugees, mostly ethnic minorities. During the first few months of 1992, more than 225,000 Rohingyas (a Muslim group that lives along the western border) fled to Bangladesh. About 10,000 Kachin refugees escaped into China's Yunnan Province. Some 60,000 Karens and Mons had fled the SLORC troops, and thousands more were crossing the border into Thailand weekly. Even in the remote and mountainous region of northwestern Burma, thousands of Naga Hills tribespeople fled into the Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur.

By now I understood the importance of witnessing these events myself. I hastily arranged a flight to Bangkok. After two more days of overnight bus and truck rides, I arrived once again at the banks of the Moei River. Across the turbulent water lay a burning Burma.

The two-hour boat trip, downriver to Manerplaw, was punctuated by the deep and haunting percussion of heavy artillery, mortars and rockets exploding in the distance. Our boatload of tense, heavily armed Karen soldiers crouched low until we arrived at the banks of the besieged democratic headquarters.

Jumping ashore and running up the steep river bank, I entered Manerplaw. It was a ghost town. Except for several high-ranking Karen officials, a few members of Aung San Suu Kyi's

democratic party, the government-in-exile's prime minister Dr. Sein Win, and a handful of armed soldiers, Manerplaw was virtually empty – a mere skeleton of what it had been a year before. All able-bodied men, women and sometimes even children as young as 10 years old, had been mobilized to defend the area from the rapidly advancing SLORC troops.

That night the cool mountain air and a blanket of thick fog enveloped the remote settlement. Anxious and unable to sleep, I walked around the grounds seeking familiar faces. Now and then the urgent static of a walkie-talkie pierced the dark; I was startled by the unexpected blast of an exploding rocket echoing within the steep mountainous ridges surrounding us. I knew that my student friends and the Karen soldiers were fighting for their lives just a few miles away.

The next day, unwilling to remain behind the scenes, I got clearance to travel to the front lines. I made the short boat trip down the Moei River under military escort, then navigated down the Salween River amid sporadic mortar fire. The Mae Pah Ridge, rising beyond the hills that surround Manerplaw, loomed 4,100 feet above the riverbank. Along its precipitous slopes lay dense jungle canopy, where thousands of SLORC guerrillas were assaulting the 4,000 Karen and other freedom fighters dug in along the ridge. If the Mae Pah Ridge fell, Manerplaw would be at the mercy of SLORC's heavy artillery.

Suddenly I noticed a bloated and mutilated body floating nearby, face up. The man was naked except for his underwear and a scarf tied around his neck. Both arms, pulled from their shoulder sockets, were bent behind his back. There were large chunks of flesh missing from his inner legs, indicating he'd been tortured. His face was swollen and black, and it appeared he'd been bludgeoned to death with a rifle butt or large stick.

This was the usual fate of military porters, and SLORC had enslaved 20,000 of them during the last three months in this area alone. These porters, usually young men, were forcibly seized and taken into the war zone to serve as pack animals for military supplies and as human mine sweepers. Numerous shallow mass graves were being discovered throughout the region, filled with the mutilated bodies of these conscripted laborers.

By mid-afternoon I arrived at the small Mae Pah supply camp, which was bunkered into the earth along the swirling green water of the Salween River. Soldiers were dug in deeply to protect themselves from mortar and rocket attacks. A constant stream of casualties was being brought in from the jungle, carried on bamboo-and-burlap stretchers. They were loaded onto river boats and rushed to the makeshift hospital across the river.

One screaming man in bloodstained clothes was carried into camp lying on his stomach. Whole pieces of his back were missing. As the writhing body was carried past, I turned to an onlooker and asked, nearly fainting, "Will he survive?"

"No, he'll be dead in a couple of hours," the man replied matter-of-factly. "Do you know how that man's wounds were caused? They came from the Swedish-made Carl Gustav rocket. It's designed to explode in the air and project razor-sharp pieces of shrapnel over a wide radius. It's the most lethal weapon SLORC has used against us thus far."

"A Swedish-made rocket?" I said in astonishment. "How has SLORC gotten Swedish made rockets?"

"We think they were obtained illegally through Singapore. We don't know how." He shook his head, walked off and jumped back into his bomb trench. I wondered what Alfred Nobel, the Swede who had established the Peace Prize that Suu Kyi had just won, would think of all this.

A few days later I was allowed to interview a small group of recently escaped Burmese

porters. Most of them had been found by Karen soldiers, starving and quivering in shock while wandering aimlessly in the jungle. One of them shuddered visibly as a translator helped him recount their ordeal.

SLORC soldiers came into our village, killing people at random. Others started gang-raping our wives and daughters – especially the younger girls. Hundreds of us tried to flee, but the soldiers had encircled the village. Most of the men – but many women too – were herded like animals and told that we were now military porters. We could take nothing with us except the clothes on our bodies.

Over the next two months each of us had to carry heavy loads of munitions. I carried four grenade launchers (about 50 lbs.) over the steep mountain tracks. We were regularly beaten with large sticks and rifle butts. With little water and half-cooked rice only once a day, sometimes only every other day, we grew weary and sick. After several weeks I didn't care whether I lived or died.

I watched many of my comrades fall sick. Often SLORC soldiers would just kick our exhausted friends over the ridge or down a steep hill and leave them for dead. Many were beaten in the face with rifle butts until they were nearly unconscious; then the soldiers would cover the victim with leaves and light the leaves on fire. Others were simply shot.

There were maybe 80 women in our group. At night they were forced into a separate area. The SLORC soldiers would take any girl they wanted. Some women were gang-raped up to eight times; we could hear their screams and cries but could do nothing. Sometimes we knew that it was a friend's wife or daughter – or even our own. My wife disappeared somewhere along the way. She could have been one of the many women who bled to death after being gang-raped.

Other escaped porters had similar stories to tell. But later, when I spoke with a number of captured SLORC soldiers, they either denied the porters' accounts or blamed their officers, who "forced us to behave this way."

I was able to interview one of those officers when, several nights later, a SLORC corporal with ten years' active service was captured. He was extremely thin, would not respond to my questions about torture and rape, and regarded me impassively as I pressed him. "Why," I asked, "are you willing to kill your own people?"

He looked at me intensely. "Because if we don't follow orders we are shot on the spot. This I know. I've seen it happen a number of times. Once in the military we become prisoners in our own army. All of us hate the SLORC leaders, especially Khin Nyunt. They demand that we kill, torture and burn villages."

"Nevertheless," I said, "you're still willing to kill your own people. Why are you exterminating your people's right to freedom and democracy? Don't you know that the whole world has condemned your SLORC leaders?"

"I know nothing," he said, staring into the small fire between us. "If I don't fight, I'm dead."

After ten days of living with the democratic forces, my main concern was to return to the United States with a clear understanding of what they needed and how the western world could help. The next morning I met with David Tharckabaw, the eloquent general secretary of the Overseas Karen Organization, a refugee organization based in Thailand.

He planted himself heavily on a crude wooden bench and spent two hours bringing me up to date on the details of Burma's plight. "Ne Win, Saw Maung and Khin Nyunt have no sense of morality," he said in his low monotone.

They've injected their 280,000 SLORC soldiers with racist and distorted ideals, with the

aim to have their killing machine exterminate our race—not just the Karens, but other ethnic minorities as well: the Shans, Mons, the Rohingyas, Kachins, Karennis and others. SLORC's policy is one of mass slaughter.

The SLORC troops storm into our villages and burn them to the ground – hundreds of them all over the country. They kill our livestock, cut down our fruit trees, burn our crops and food supplies. This is why hundreds of thousands of terrorized refugees are fleeing the country.

Even more tragic is the fact that four or five million others are trapped inside Burma. Either they've been displaced, herded into military secured encampments or have fled to a deplorable existence in dense jungles and mountainous areas all over the country. Many others are too scared to cross the border into Thailand because of the Thai government's support of SLORC and their oppressive policy toward Burmese refugees.

Fixing his eyes on mine, he said, "You ask how the international community can help us. Someone needs to intervene and stop this madness. Now."

Later that same afternoon I was able to speak with U Win Khet, an elderly gentleman and well known Burmese novelist. He's one of Aung San Suu Kyi's closest colleagues and a cofounder of the National League for Democracy.

Two days after Aung San Suu Kyi's arrest on July 20, 1989, SLORC soldiers surrounded U Win Khet's residence in Rangoon. But he had been tipped off beforehand and fled to Manerplaw. That was 16 months ago. Now he was suffering from severe malaria. I met him in a small wooden hut that was serving as the current NLD headquarters.

"What does the future hold for Burma?" I asked, realizing the broad sweep and speculative nature of the question.

Clearly in pain from the malaria, U Win Khet replied weakly: "This struggle is between a handful of military men and the entire population of Burma – people who are literally starving for freedom. We feel the people will win in the end. We will not let go of our democratic aspirations. We will never obey SLORC's demands. We know they'll ruthlessly suppress us. This they have made perfectly clear. But that's their great mistake.

"Now all the democratic forces are standing and fighting against SLORC under one banner. We are united in our struggle for democracy. SLORC's concept is might is right. But this concept never wins in the long run. Our conviction is right is might."

Our conversation was interrupted as a piercing mechanical scream filled the air. U Win Khet's attendant raced into the hut. "SLORC jets!" he yelled. He picked U Win Khet up from his bed and carried him to a nearby bomb shelter, where we waited out the attack.

The shelter was a deep ditch protected by heavy logs. Inside with me were half a dozen people – four NLD officials, a young Burmese woman and her two young daughters, who clung to their mother and cried. No one spoke.

After half an hour the Chinese-made F-6 jet fighters tore away and I walked, my legs still trembling, back to NLD headquarters. When U Win Khet returned, my questions had a fresh urgency. "What can the world community do to help you and Burma's democratic movement?"

"All nations should put into immediate effect international trade sanctions and a complete arms embargo," he said. He was shaken by the jet attack and sweating – a symptom of advanced malaria.

"Companies should not invest in Burma, and all other companies that do should divest their interests. Their dollars go toward the further killing of our people. SLORC has no right to the UN seat they've arbitrarily stolen from the people. It should be vacated at once. We also need humanitarian aid to assist the tens of thousands of refugees. These people are suffering from

malnutrition, disease and abuse by the military."

While I was taking his photograph, the jets reappeared. Again, U Win Khet was rushed into a bomb shelter.

That night, a rainstorm swept through the area. Rain in February – midway through the dry season is unheard of, and seemed an act of divine intervention (since it holds off the bombers). At dawn we managed to get a boat and headed upriver to escape an almost certain air attack on Manerplaw. The sound of rocket and mortar bombing continued without break. After a few hours we climbed ashore and began the five-hour trek over the mountains back to the road and to safety.

As I expected, Manerplaw was severely strafed by SLORC jets the day after we left. There were few deaths; by that time, fortunately, the settlement had been almost totally evacuated.

On March 22, Sleeping Dog Mountain, one of the highest points in the vicinity of Manerplaw, was taken by SLORC soldiers. By March 28, Manerplaw was repeatedly shelled by heavy weapons. The democratic forces withstood the attack and defended their position. Meanwhile, thousands of refugees continued to pour into Thailand, Bangladesh, Laos and China.

For those of us who live in free countries, it's almost impossible to conceive of SLORC's endless atrocities. Most of us have never even seen a single murder victim – how can we fathom impending genocide?

The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was a plea for SLORC to abandon its tactics of terror and to free Aung San Suu Kyi and all of Burma's political prisoners. It was a call for the immediate halting of forced relocations, unlawful arrests, mass torture, summary executions and the systematic extermination of ethnic nationalities.

On December 9th, 1991, a group of nine Nobel laureates – including Bishop Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, Dr. Elie Wiesel and Dr. Oscar Arias – drafted and signed a letter to the leaders of SLORC, which read in part:

We are writing to voice our concern for our fellow Nobelist, Aung San Suu Kyi, and for the people of your country. As the lack of human rights and democracy in your country has caused much suffering and distress, we urge you to enter into dialogue with those leaders you have detained, and so take a step in bringing peace to your troubled country.

By opening up your country to free political debate...you would not only advance the cause of peace, but you would be holding to the honorable Buddhist qualities of humility, understanding, compassion and tolerance.

Needless to say, these sentiments fell on deaf ears.

Epilogue

In the spring of 1992, Burma began to reappear in the news as SLORC announced a series of political changes and "reforms." These were transparent ploys designed to relieve international pressure and improve Burma's abominable reputation on the global scene.

First, SLORC General Saw Maung resigned after a nervous breakdown. Some analysts hypothesize that he was dumped, possibly as a scapegoat for four years of terror. The move apparently was engineered by ambitious SLORC Major General Khin Nyunt, Burma's notorious "Prince of Evil," who experts believe covets the top post. To avoid inflaming an already seething nation, Saw Maung was replaced by SLORC General Than Shwe (tahn SHWAY). Like his former boss, Than Shwe was directly involved in the massacres that took place during the summer of 1988.

While this shakeup occurred, Ne Win – who has not appeared in public for years – ordered all pictures of himself to be removed from public places. What he hoped to gain from such a move remains unclear; but one Burmese resident, quoted in the San Francisco Chronicle, suggested that he may be trying to avoid divine retribution. "He wants to try to clean things up," the observer said, "before he passes into the next life as a cockroach."

Regardless of such gestures, though, it's believed that Ne Win remains firmly in power – maneuvering his puppets, from behind the scenes.

On April 28, after a four-month-long "scorched earth" war against the ethnic minorities, SLORC announced over state-controlled media that "the [offensive] has been suspended in view of national unity and goodwill." In fact, SLORC's front line positions were simply digging in for the rainy season, as they do every year. The rains continued through October. September had witnessed the arrival of fresh troops and weapons in preparation for a "final" onslaught against the democratic forces. The rest of Burma enjoyed no seasonal respite from SLORC terror; in Rangoon, Mandalay and the major cities, it was business as usual.

On a more positive note, the Norwegian Government has demonstrated unprecedented support by donating a one hour per day radio program to the democratic opposition, which is being short wave broadcast directly into Burma. SLORC has tried numerous times to jam the transmission, but it is managing to get through, albeit faintly.

A renewed attempt to force Suu Kyi into exile was made in early May 1992. SLORC authorities allowed Michael Aris, Suu Kyi's husband, to visit her for the first time in over two years. Upon his return from Rangoon, Aris reported that "the offer was repeatedly made to release her if she went into exile."

He went on to say that "[Suu Kyi] never even discussed the matter because she says it is not negotiable....Since the day she began her endeavors, she resolved to stay and see it all through, come what may....In the nearly two and a half years since I last saw Suu, things have not been easy for her, but in the days we spent together she repeatedly pointed out to me that others have suffered much more than she has."

A surprising event occurred on May 15, 1992, when Suu Kyi's 19-year-old son Alexander delivered a speech written by his mother. Transmitted with the permission of the SLORC authorities, this was the first statement the world has received from Suu Kyi since her arrest in July, 1989. Among other things, she wrote:

The world is watching Burma to see whether the rights of citizens to participate fully in the political process of their country will be conceded; whether the will of the people as expressed through free and fair elections will truly be respected; and whether there will be

serious moves to protect human rights by promoting the rule of law and by establishing an independent judiciary.

For the forty million people of Burma, the nightmare continues. Will their long night end, or will the Golden Land become Southeast Asia's next killing fields?

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)