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Photo by - Saw Eh Doe Doh Moo
The scene evokes familiarity for those from Burma. Street stalls selling Mohingar, Shan tofu noodles and a range of sipyan - thick Burmese curries. A Khithaung Thachin (old days) singer precedes a duo who belt out a Burmese-style rap. A game of Chinlone takes centre stage – a sport not of winners or losers but rather how beautifully it is played, in keeping with its status as the ‘sport of meditation’. The vibrant colours and decorative adornments of Chin, Kachin, Shan and Karen dress stop passers-by who crane their necks to look in wonder. Stalls sell everything from Burmese lacquer ware to pictures of Aung San Suu Kyi, Burmese art and crafts and academic books.

It’s a clear crisp day, perfect for a festival, but we are a long way from Burma. The scene is a cultural festival being played out in the heart of Sydney’s Darling Harbour. Its aim is to raise funds for Burmese affected by the devastation of Cyclone Nargis. Put on by the Australia Burma Community Development Network (ABCD), the day is one of many ways in which Burmese communities overseas are retaining ties to their homeland. As more and more Burmese leave, or flee, Burma’s skeletal shores these connections become increasingly important.

This year UNHCR announced that over the past three years 30,144 refugees from the camps on the Thai-Burma border were resettled in third countries. These refugees are the latest in a steady stream of uprooted Burmese. It highlights a poignant and sometimes forgotten fact. People from Burma have been fleeing now for more than forty years. Burmese began arriving in Australia in the 1960s following Ne Win’s military coup. Further influxes followed, from the 1974 protests around U Thant’s funeral to the 1988 uprising for democracy. Throughout the nineties Australia continued to resettle refugees from the camps, taking 2961 in 2007/08 alone. There are now estimated to be more than 15,000 Burmese living in Australia. It is a significant population and the ways in which support manifests varies greatly: from assistance to the newly-arrived, putting on cultural events, offering translator services, speaking at public events or liaising at the government level.

There is a long history of Burmese who have fled their country seeking shelter and protection on other’s shores. In the past this often meant never seeing your country or your family again. But today this mass of wandering peoples displaced from their homeland are no longer so isolated. One reason in particular is the advent of new communications technologies. It has linked people and resources in ways that were unheard of even ten years ago, and it plays a key role in the way exiled and resettled communities maintain connections with their homeland.

While many who reach the perceived safety of third countries settle into a life that is largely apolitical – an understandable choice given their experiences preceding resettlement; many others choose to continue the struggle from afar. Groups and networks form with
various political clout and they maintain a unique, sometimes abstract space. They are highly dispersed, rarely meet face-to-face and do not inhabit the close physical or geographical boundaries we usually associate with community formation.

Here is how it commonly occurs.

Burmese living overseas mobilize around websites, chat forums and global activist networks, connections that are largely occurring in what we increasingly refer to as cyberspace. The groups maintain contact with partners in their ‘home’ country at the same time as they are enabled and strengthened by the structures of their ‘host’ country. In Australia the network group Burma Campaign Australia is an example of an organization that straddles both worlds – acting as a hub for information flows between other activist groups around the world, the Australian political environment and individuals inside Burma. The group would not function without the resources provided by its ‘host’ country, Australia, or the information provided by its partners in the ‘home’ country, Burma.

There are many other groups in Australia who make use of similar networking. Political groups such as the Burma Office and ABSDF (Australia Branch), cultural and development groups such as ABCD and the Burma Education Fund and ethnic groups such as the Karen Youth Organisation (KYO) and the Ethnic Nationalities Organisation all benefit from new communications technology which enhances the capacity of dispersed populations to mobilise around political, cultural and social issues. E-lists such as Google or Yahoo Groups administer hundreds of group listings on Burma alone, ranging from activist networks to celebrations of popular Burmese identities to family linear studies to cultural exchanges to fundraising for aid programs. Groups, causes, movements and organisations create systems of connection through their use of websites, blogs and multimedia applications such as Flickr and YouTube.

The role new technologies play in connecting Burma’s dispersed political movement must be approached from a balanced perspective; there are certainly limitations around affecting actual political change. However, these connections should not be underestimated in their ability to exchange and disseminate crucial information integral to global campaigning and response mechanisms.

An example would be the Pepsi out of Burma campaign. International pressure from community-based organisations, students and activist networks, made up of Burmese and international populations led to Pepsi’s eventual withdrawal from Burma in 1995. The campaign was conducted globally and mostly online. Another example is the worldwide coverage and condemnation that emerged from SWAN’s ‘License to Rape’ report released in 2002. The findings of this report reached the highest levels of the global community, being discussed at the UN as well as being cited in the US Congress. It also caused the SPDC to launch their own counter-investigation, with a predictable denouncement of the reports claims. They were however subjected to repeated enquiries from the UN Special Rapporteur to Burma on the content of the report and their intentions in addressing the reports claims. While the Burmese military continue to use rape as a weapon of war, they no longer do so under a code of

Kachin traditional dance present at the festival, Photo, Naw Paw
silence. These campaigns are just some examples of how an active exiled community can work in conjunction with grassroots partners.

The Burmese community outside the country plays an important role in the ongoing struggle for political change in Burma, and they do so from an enormous geographical distance. They also offer practical support, sometimes with quite tangible outcomes. ABCD has so far distributed more than A$50,000 worth of aid to the cyclone relief effort. Members of the Burma Campaign Australia hold semi-regular audiences with state and federal politicians who in turn push for parliamentary action on Burma. The community-based organisations provide important anecdotal and statistical information to Australian NGOs and government bodies who implement Burma-related policies on a domestic and global level. This type of support may not bring immediate political change in Burma but it is certainly part of the process that eventually will.

On the day of the cultural festival in Darling Harbour you hear singers, dancers, stallholders and donors all expressing their desire to support the cause. “When I heard about this I wanted to help in any way that I could,” was a common remark. Helping is as much a psychological issue as it is a practical one. Those that involuntarily flee harbour a sense of justice, which compels them to support a resolution to the conflict that has displaced them, and continues to haunt those left behind. There are significant benefits to feeling like a participatory, valued and empowered member of a larger, connected community, working for basic human dignity. And of course, underlying this need to help is also a longing for home; the sounds, smells and sights of the familiar, the memory of a place before the conflict shattered it. To replicate that in a foreign country is a poor substitute for the real thing. But sometimes that’s all there is.

Burma is a long way from Australia, geographically and psychologically, and while a political resolution is central to any plan for Burma’s future, cultural events such as those conducted by ABCD are integral to bringing Burma to a large, mostly unknowing Australian population. In such a long-running conflict as Burma’s, support needs to come from every possible angle, and for the Burmese community living overseas that support is no longer compromised by distance.

A mother’s sadness and Happiness:
Life is a struggle to be able to survive and to fight against injustice
By Ta Sor Htee

“Born in 1941 at a remote village in Karen State, Burma, Peh Htoo has suffered hardship of war and conflict. She fled to the deep forest to take refuge from the attack of the Japanese troops and then came to the Burma dictatorship eras from BSPP (Burmese Socialist Program Party) the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) and currently to the SPDC (State Peace and Development Council). Peh Htoo, the oldest daughter of a poor farmer, recalled days from her childhood.”

A place to call home:

“I’ve never found a place to call home; I’ve never found a peaceful moment to call life. Since I was born I felt that happiness is so far away from my life” said Peh Htoo. “My father passed away when I was just twelve years old and he left me with my mom, my sisters and my youngest brother. Traditionally, the eldest child has to take care of the family and take role as the family’s leader when the head of family passed away. My mom was getting old, my brother was very young and I was just twelve and it was so hard for us to struggle for our survival. My father was a very great herbal medicine doctor but he could pass some of his knowledge to me before he passed away because I was too you during that time” She added.
When she was twenty five years old, Peh Htoo met with a man who was a member of the Karen National Union (KNU). They fell in love and set up a family in 1965. They lived with great happiness and Peh Htoo earned her living by betel nut and durian gardening while her husband was serving his people as a KNU member. They had three daughters and two sons, and Peh Htoo had never though about awful days would arrive to her. Unfortunately, three months before she gave birth to her youngest daughter her husband was killed by the Burmese army. With five children, she has to be a mother as well as taking father’s role to take care of the family.

In the middle of the 1970s was the starting of the four cuts operation (Cut off food, communication, recruitment and transportation) carried out by the Burmese Army under control of the Ne Win dictatorship. Since that time forced relocation and forced displacement were started. The Ne Win government was afraid that the villagers would give support and food to the KNU, so they forced the villagers to move to the relocation site. When people lived in the relocation site they had to live under control of the government. Half of the villagers in this area moved to take refuge in Thailand in the Mae Hong Son province and they were the first ever Burmese refugees in Thailand (1975-1976). The other half of the villagers decided to move down to the low land area. Peh Htoo strongly decided not to move to anywhere and stayed in her village and hided in the jungle.

She believed that if you give an inch of your land to Burmese Army they will take an inch and if you give one square mile they will take, so she decided not to give even an inch of her land to the Burmese Army.

The Ne Win dictatorship practiced the four cuts operation very strongly and created starvation not only for Peh Htoo and her children but also those people who lived in that area. Peh Htoo as the head of the family struggled very hard with the support of her brother in-law as she did not want to see her children starve to death. Sometimes her family had to live without rice for month and only had to eat edible vegetable, fish and animal meat that she could find in the jungle. She decided to commit suicide several times, but when she talked to her children about her plan of suicide, she could not negotiate with her young children. The children had no school to study, no medicine when they got sick, no friend to play with and no security guide for them when the Burmese Army approached.

For this reason, Peh Htoo sent all her four younger children to Thai Burma border to their uncle and her eldest daughter to her grandma in the city of Burma. She had to use a lot of courage for herself to make this decision but she only decided this for the future of her children. If she let her children stay with her, she couldn’t imagine what the future of her children would look like. Besides, she always had to worry about her children to be killed by the Burmese soldiers.

It was very hard to get message from each other and it was a long distance to travel to meet each other often. It took seven years for Peh Htoo to see her children at Thai Burma border. She met her oldest daughter only 28 years after she left.
“I have got so much criticism from my relatives and people in my community. People in my community said that I sent away all of my children to other places without visiting them. I was told that I was a stupid and crazy mother. Yes, I am crazy and stupid but I have ambitions for my children. I am getting old to struggle for my livelihood but I will never give up for my life.”

“Community mother of the commander”

None of her children stay with her but she tried to be a mother of the community. She has more children in the community than her real children because children in the community are regarded as Peh Htoo’s own children. They love her very much and she loves them whole heartedly. “I have to travel in the middle of the night when they call me to go and give treatment for their sick children. Besides, I gave treatment to the injured Karen soldiers in the war zones as well. All of the young Karen soldiers in the village called her “MUM”. I praised them when they had done well and I scolded them when they did bad things. When they did some thing wrong I told them straightly and sometimes they got angry with me and sometimes they even decided to kill me. I did not care, because I believe the truth will protect me. I provide free medical treatment for the community as I could find the herbal medicine easily in the jungle. The villagers also walk days to bring their children to me for the treatment. We do not have clinic or hospital in the community. Even we had one there is not enough medicine for the treatment.

Peh Htoo believed that her children stay with their uncle and aunts can take care of them. So she decided not to leave her village as people need her when they give birth, and when they get sick. She enjoyed sharing her knowledge to those people. Moreover when the Burmese Army approached to the village, all of the villagers come to her and asked for suggestion. For instance, villagers waited for her decision of which place they will run and hide. They ran and hide together, then come back home together when the Burmese Army have left the village. Sometimes when they come back they can still see their houses turned into ashes. They had to rebuild everything from the beginning.

“My vision”

“I am a woman just like other women in the world. I am happy when I see good things happen. Good thing is not a wealth for me, good thing for me is when we live in unity, love, happiness and when human respects each other. I cry when I feel sad and laugh when I am happy. Like other women in Burma, I cried when my husband died in fighting killed by Burmese Army and cried when my relatives were killed. But the question is “Do our tears can wash away our sorrow or suffering?” I have enough experiences with the fighting and killings and do not want to see it any more. I believe in peace and justice. If you do believe what I believe let us work together to bring our beliefs into practice.”

The Four Cuts Operation:

The military Junta that rules Burma introduced the Four Cut Operation in the 1970s. The Operation aimed to undermine the support networks of the insurgent groups by cutting their access to information, supplies, recruits and food. In order to cut these networks, the military dictatorship targeted the civilian population. This Operation leads to increased militarisation, forced displacement, human rights abuses and oppression of Burmese villagers.
May 4, 2007 – life has become difficult and lonely for Saw Lay Der. A year ago, he lived happily with his wife and two children in Mone Township. But that life was shattered one afternoon when Burmese soldiers attacked his village.

The soldiers came at 5pm on March 8, 2006. More than 100 of them attacked without warning, killing two villagers and injuring another. The rest fled into the jungle without food, clothing or other supplies.

“The Burmese military troops shot at everybody they saw in the village,” said Saw Lay Der. His wife died from child birth complications and two young children died by malaria while they were hiding from the soldiers in the surrounding jungle for 10 days. There was no doctor or medicine, and he could not travel to get help for his family.

While on the run, Saw Lay Der and his fellow villagers lived in constant fear. Pregnant women traveled deep into the jungle to give birth without medical care. The rest lived on leaves, bark from banana trees and whatever else they could find in the forest.

Saw Lay Der’s experiences are common among villagers in conflict zones in eastern Burma, where attacks over the last year by the Burmese army have displaced thousands.

Children are the most vulnerable among internally displaced people in Burma. According to a 2006 report Chronic Emergency by the Back Pack Health worker Team (BPHWT), the children of IDPs under the age of five are twice as likely to die as those of any other age group.

The report said Burmese soldiers often dill, torture or rape villagers who try to return to their villages or who are found outside permitted zones in order to scare others from trying to return to their homes.

“The [Burmese] military is brutal to villagers,” said Saw Lay Der. “They accuse them of serving the Karen National Union (KNU). They treat us as their enemies.”

Burmese soldiers remained in Saw Lay Der’s village for four days following the attack, before moving on to another village. Those who had fled to the jungle feared returning home because the soldiers often plant landmines around villages before they leave.

Saw Lay Der’s life changed quickly, and he says his future does not look good. “I need liberty and I need to work for my daily survival,” he said while visiting his brother in a refugee camp on the Thai-Burmese border. “I hope to live peacefully again in my village.”
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The United Nationalities Alliance open letter to UN Security Council:

The United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) stated in an open letter to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon on Monday that in order to build national reconciliation, tripartite talks involving the Burmese junta, the political opposition parties and the ethnic political parties was first and foremost required.

The open letter went on to say that the UN special envoy’s mission had not brought about any tangible outcome despite his having visited Burma six times since he was appointed as the special advisor to Burma in 2005.

The ethnic political alliance also alluded to the junta’s “seven-step road map” toward democracy, calling the national convention, the state constitution and the referendum “sham processes” which were legitimized “without the real will of the people in Burma.”

The UNA urged the UN to exert “appropriate pressure” on the junta to engage in a tripartite dialogue. Unless national reconciliation was established, the UNA warned, there would be no peace and tranquility in Burma.

The UNA’s open letter was also sent to the president of the UN Security Council, as well as to ambassadors of the permanent members of the UN Security Council—the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia and China.

Thai PM Samak convince Burma to let UN in elections:

Thailand will try to convince Burma to allow the United Nations to play a role in its general elections scheduled for 2010, Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej said.

The Prime minister did not go into detail about what role the UN could play in the elections in Burma. However he stressed he would not mention the position of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi when he talks with the Burmese generals.

Mr Samak, speaking at the Foreign Ministry yesterday, said the UN’s experience in organizing elections in Cambodia and East Timor could help Thailand’s neighbor return to democracy.