



BURMA LINK NEWSLETTER OCTOBER 2014

Burma Link Newsletter 2/2014 (covering April – September)

MISSION: Burma Link upholds the voices of the people of Burma and works to empower the people to become agents of change in their own lives

Message from the editor

This is Burma Link’s second ever newsletter and we are happy that you have found it! With extremely limited resources, Burma Link has come a long way, and with your help, there is no limit to where we can go. Burma Link started only two years ago in humble surroundings in Mae La refugee camp with nothing but a determination and passion to help the people of Burma have their voices heard. We hope that you will find Burma Link a useful source of information as well as a channel to listen to Burma’s voices for change. We are especially focused on bringing the voices of Burma’s ethnic and displaced people to the world’s attention. We are an all-volunteer organisation, and you can join us as a supporting member or become actively involved in our work as a member or volunteer!

Ariana Zarleen

In this newsletter

- QUICK FACTS ABOUT BURMA AND THE BORDER – DID YOU KNOW THIS?
- WHAT’S HAPPENING NOW?
- NEW PUBLICATIONS
- LATEST STORIES OF THE PEOPLE OF BURMA (Karen, Lahu, Naga)
- SELECTED QUOTES

Recent activities

We dedicated the month of August for spreading awareness of one of the world’s most forgotten people – the Naga



The 3rd AOC Leadership Program completed in Mae La!

From May 5 to 9, we completed the third AOC (Agents of Change) Leadership training with eight promising ethnically diverse young leaders from Burma. The 5-day training took place at Mae La refugee camp, and it was our first AOC training conducted using both English and Burmese.

The AOC program aims at developing qualities of empowered people; essential life and leadership skills like confidence, honesty and courage, responsible citizenship, and the ability to effectively deal with others. During their **Journey toward Empowerment**, the participants also learn how to help their community members value their own voice and have their voices heard.



*We believe that cultivating effective local leadership is the determining factor for positive change. **AOC Leadership Network** aims at building a self-sustaining leadership network model to empower communities and break the silence, through promoting the sharing of information, stories, and life experiences of communities from Burma locally and around the world.*



Quick facts about Burma and the border

- DID YOU KNOW?

About Burma:

- The Burma army has **deliberately targeted civilian populations**, described as **genocide of ethnic peoples**.
- Nearly **three million people** have fled Burma and **half a million** remain internally displaced. Most of them belong to ethnic nationality groups.
- Grave **violations of humanitarian law** continue in ethnic areas with impunity.
- In Shan and Kachin States Burma army continues to launch attacks on ethnic civilians, killing and torturing innocent villagers. At least **100,000** ethnic people, including Shan, Kachin, Ta'ang (Palaung) and Lahu, have been displaced.

About the border:

- Thailand hosts about **120,000 refugees** in nine official camps on the Thailand-Burma border. The real number of refugees is **at least double**.
- International donors have recently **shifted funds from Thailand-Burma border to central Burma** where funds are unable to reach ethnic border areas. When NGOs reach ethnic areas, they often do so accompanied by government soldiers, who then extend their reach deeper into ethnic territories.

Because of recent funding cuts on the border:

- Ethnic organisations and peoples are once again being **silenced**.
- Vulnerable populations on both sides of the border now **lack crucial aid**, including IDPs inside Burma, and refugees and migrants in Thailand. Many refugees feel forced to return with little hope of a brighter future, and migrant students' dreams are at peril.



What's happening now?

- **Karen National Union (KNU) leadership crisis**
KNU suspends its membership with the ethnic alliance UNFC, despite loud objections from the Karen civil society and other Karen leaders.
- **Tensions rise in Karen and Mon states**
Bombs found in Myawaddi across the border from Mae Sot, heavy clashes between Karen and Burmese troops involving mortar fire and grenades.
- **Fighting continues in Shan and Kachin States**
Ta'ang Army reports at least 200 Burmese soldiers killed in clashes this year. Government negotiates peace while launching large-scale attacks in northern Burma.
- **Severe concerns over development plans in Karen State**
Japan's development plans have been loudly rejected by Karen civil society organisations who fear the potential of such plans to fuel conflict and facilitate land confiscation.
- **Systemic impunity for military rape continues**
Chin women refused permission to hold peaceful protest after attempted rape by a Burmese soldier – women charged and soldier left without punishment.
- **Ceasefire negotiations**
Ceasefire negotiations continue whilst political goals of the ethnic people remain unaddressed and Burma Army increases reach in ethnic lands.

New publications

Multimedia

Documentary by Karen National Development Organization (KNDO) *Children Are Our Future* (May 2014)

Reports

The Border Consortium (TBC): Programme Report January-June 2014. (September 2014)

ND-Burma: Human Rights Situation in Burma. January-June 2014. (August 2014)

Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG): Truce or Transition? Trends in human rights abuse and local response in Southeast Myanmar since the 2012 ceasefire. (May 2014)

The Border Consortium (TBC): What Refugees Say (May 2014)



You can support us by donating, volunteering, or becoming a member. Go to burmalink.org/qet-involved

LATEST STORIES OF THE PEOPLE OF BURMA

'I Am One of the Top People on Their Lists to Be Killed': Naga Leader Part 1



Shapwon is a leader of the Naga. He joined the nationalist movement in 1975 and is now the Joint Secretary of Naga National Council. He is a leader who is still miraculously alive after all his colleagues have been wiped out by Indian and Burmese forces as well as Naga socialists. For decades, numerous groups have tried to assassinate Shapwon in this present day head hunt. His love for his people has caused him great suffering, but there is no other way this brave leader could have chosen to live. This is part 1 of Shapwon's story – Nothing short of a Hollywood thriller.

*"... At night they came to arrest us. I heard a sound **crock crock crock**, boots, like people going around in the resident. The enemy surrounded us so I woke my boys up. I looked in front of the house, where I saw two men squatted down. I thought they were Burmese Army soldiers and opened fired upon them, and jumped out from the house and took a position to fire more at them before I retreat..."*
[Read full story on the website.](#)

'One Day the World Will Recognise Our Sovereignty': Naga Leader Part 2



In a land where all who speak out the truth are brutally murdered, how did Shapwon, the outspoken leader of the Naga, survive?

"...We should speak the truth. But many people are afraid of speaking the truth because of bullets. Because of bullets in Nagaland. Those who speak the truth are killed. They are after my life not because of I am a liar, murderer or a traitor but because I am telling and stating

the truth and do not support their socialism. I am telling the truth because I cannot tolerate false accusations and killings, telling lies and destroying our society...." [Read full story on the website.](#)

Part 1: 'INGOs cannot reach Lahu areas and the needs of the Lahu people'



Kyar Yin Shell is a 26-year-old young man from Kengtung, the 'dark and dirty' capital city of eastern Salween in the Shan State. Kyar Yin Shell is Lahu, a little known ethnic group that lives

scattered around the mountains of Burma, China, Laos, and Thailand. As most Lahu people, Kyar Yin Shell grew up in a village, but unlike many others he was lucky enough to go to school. As a teenager, hard-working Kyar Yin Shell had great hopes for his future until it all seems to end one day; wrong medical treatment left Kyar Yin Shell paralyzed. Kyar Yin Shell lost all hope for his future and like so many others in the Shan State, he became addicted to drugs. During the dark times that followed, Kyar Yin Shell could never have known that he would not only survive and learn to live with his disability, but work actively for his people and travel overseas to represent his country.

*"... There's no civil war in the Lahu areas, but no development. Nothing has changed. **Since I was a child nothing has changed**, it's the same. The town of Kengtung is very old, very dirty. No new buildings. Sorry still no internet, still dark. No electricity..."* [Read full story on the website.](#)

Part 2: 'They create problems between Lahu and other ethnicities'



Lahu are a little known ethnic group up on the mountains of the Shan State. Lack of opportunity coupled with easily available drugs has led to widespread drug abuse especially among Lahu youth. Lahu issues are more related to drugs and lack of development than Burmese military abuse.

"Last time I went to visit the Lahu area, I saw the Lahu young people, their skin colour is changing. Like yellow or brown, because they use a lot of drugs. ..." [Read the story on the website.](#)

STORIES OF THE PEOPLE OF BURMA - CONTINUES



'The British Had No Right to Draw the Borderline in the Heart of Naga Country': Eastern Naga Leader

Nagaland was once a free land with rich and unique cultural traditions that varied from village to village, each village ruled by their own chieftains. The faith of the Naga took an ugly turn after the British divided Nagaland without the consent or knowledge of the Naga who refused to acknowledge an arbitrary borderline that ran through villages, fields, and even homes. After the British left, Indian and Burmese forces occupied Naga homeland, following an agreement by their leaders that the Western part of Nagaland was to be ruled by India and Eastern part by Burma. The Nagas never succumbed to the foreign occupation – Naga warriors have now been fighting a desperate struggle for freedom and sovereignty for over six decades. In this rare in-depth interview, W. Shapwon, an Eastern Naga leader and Joint Secretary of the Naga National Council, reveals the troubling history and current issues of Naga Hills and talks about the dreams of the Naga nation.

“...India and Burma had no right to invade Nagaland. They had no right to colonise Nagaland again. They themselves bitterly fought against the British colonialism. **After they break from the British colony, how can they use the same colonialism against the Naga?** They have no right to suppress the Naga people. They have no right to deprive the right of Nagas to be a nation. And the British had no right to give our land to India or Burma without our consent, without our knowledge.” [Read full story on Burma Link's website.](#)



'We Weren't Afraid of Snakes or Tigers, just Burmese Soldiers'

Daw Hla Shin is a 70-year-old Karen woman from Win Tar Pan village in Bilin, Mon State. She grew up amidst Burmese Army abuse that only worsened after she married a Karen soldier. The villagers lived in constant fear of the Burmese soldiers, enduring torture, killings, and burnt homes and belongings. Having never attended school or had any connection to the outside world, Daw Hla Shin, nor her younger sister, had any idea that there would be any escape or that Thailand even existed.

“When we were children, we had to worry about Burmese soldiers coming to the village. No one dared to stay in their houses when Burmese soldiers came to village, we had to go to the jungle with our parents to hide from them. When we came back to the village they knew we will be back... They killed people who they suspected as Karen soldiers or related to Karen soldiers in some way. Even if they heard someone from the village joined Kawthoolei [Karen army] to help as a porter, they killed them when the porters came back to the village.” [Read full story on Burma Link's website.](#)

“My body cannot move, I am paralyzed” – Kyar Yin Shell

“Why the Burmese and Indian can kill us freely, we don't know” – W. Shapwon

“We want the support of the world community” – W. Shapwon

Why we uphold the voices of the people of Burma?

In order for Burma to transform to a peaceful and democratic society based on freedom and justice, the voices of the people of Burma, including the myriad organisations and people in exile, must be heard in the process. Democracy is all about people's voices, and the best way to measure the extent of reforms and progress is to listen to the people, particularly the vulnerable ethnic communities in Burma's border areas. Having access to people's voices and stories fosters greater understanding and knowledge about the past and the present as well as the similarities and differences between Burma's peoples. Sharing information and stories with both local and global communities can promote positive developments and effective action, accountability and justice as well as forgiveness and reconciliation. Storytelling can also be a healing and empowering activity that can help the people of Burma discover themselves and create a shared vision for the future.

**BURMA
LINK**

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Voices for Change.

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