

*We spread awareness of the struggle of Burma's ethnic nationalities and displaced people and share their stories and voices with the world*

### Voices of Ta'ang (Palaung)

Northern Shan state, home to a majority of the Ta'ang people (referred to as 'Palaung' by others), is among the least accessible areas in Burma. These areas host some of the bloodiest conflict, the most poppy cultivation, extremely high rates of opium addiction, and crippling poverty.

In November 2014, Burma Link spoke with three women from the Palaung Women's Organization (PWO) about the struggles their people face every day and how their organisation helps the people overcome said struggles. Burma Link also spoke with Tar Aik Bong, the chairman of Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF) and the head of the military commission of Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) about the struggle against drugs and for equal rights and a sustainable political solution to the ongoing conflict between the Burma Army and PSLF/TNLA (see pages 3-4 in this newsletter).

PSLF/TNLA regularly publishes statements and battle news, which Burma Link posts for a larger audience. In February 2015 a [statement from the PSLF](#) called for a reduction-cessation of battles between the Burma Army (BA) and the TNLA – essentially an end to BA offensives. The statement listed several reasons for the cessation of battles, which included the destruction of land in the region and the creation of war refugees due to the heavy armed conflict. The statement also prepared a list of steps for the Burma Government to take in order to end the long running civil war. On March 17, [PSLF issued a statement](#) warning that even though the ethnic armed groups are negotiating for the national ceasefire, there can be no fulfilling of the agreement while there is still massive fighting and BA offensives going on in Ta'ang and Kokang regions.

On March 31, the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT), which represents 16 ethnic armed groups, and the government's Union Peace-making Working Committee (UWPC) agreed on the draft Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA). Contrary to initial fervour around this event, this was not the actual signing of the NCA, and many more difficult negotiations and hard compromises are still to happen. [PSLF reported of more fierce battles](#), including air strikes, and human rights abuses by the Burma Army during these negotiations. In a [statement issued on March 28, 2015](#), the ethnic alliance United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) echoed the PSLF's calls for cessation of offensives and genuine political dialogue.

### Recent activities



### AOC Leadership Program in TMK

On the week of December 10<sup>th</sup> 2014, Burma Link successfully completed the 4<sup>th</sup> Agents of Change (AOC) Leadership Program at Thoo Mweh Khee Migrant Learning Centre on the Thailand-Burma border, with ten promising and motivated young Karen leaders. The 6-day training aimed at developing essential life and leadership skills like confidence, honesty and courage, responsible citizenship, and the ability to effectively deal with others. The trainees also learned how to help their community members value their voice and have their voices heard.

#### Here is what the participants said about the training:

"AOC stands for Agent of Change, it helps people's voices to be heard to the world, from Burma. This is one of the best ways for people from Burma. It helps the young generation and teaches us the qualities of empower leader for our own community. I have learned many things from this training like courage, honesty and the basic abilities of a good leader..."

- Naw Eh

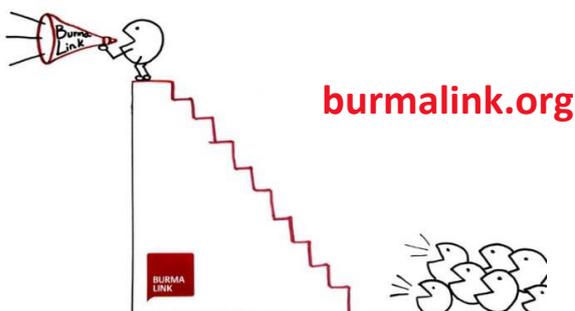
"I love AOC training and all the target and purpose of AOC. AOC changed my habit and woke me up from apathy. AOC changed my lazy heart to be proactive and open minded..."

-JB Lucky

"AOC training made me more powerful, courageous, and honest, to be a good member of community, while we live together and work together, to be responsible citizen of Burma and find out the truth story of Burma..."

-Aung Kyaw Oo

***We believe that cultivating effective local leadership is the determining factor for positive change. [AOC Leadership Network](#) is 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**.
- About **three million people** have fled Burma and over **half a million** remain internally displaced. Most of them belong to ethnic nationality groups.
- Grave **violations of humanitarian law** continue in ethnic border areas with impunity.
- Burma army continues to launch **attacks on ethnic civilians**, raping, killing and torturing innocent villagers. At least 150,000 ethnic people, including Shan, Kachin, Ta'ang (Palaung), Kokang, and Lahu, have been displaced since 2011.
- After signing ceasefires, **Burma Army has sent in more troops**, weapons, and supplies, fortified their camps, and extended their territory in ceasefire areas.

#### About the border:

- Thailand hosts about **110,000 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.
- **Talks of refugee repatriation** continue to cause anxiety and fear among the refugees.

#### 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**. Many refugees feel forced to return as surviving in the camps has become increasingly difficult.

## New publications

### Multimedia

Photo Gallery by **Burma Link** - **In Photos: Insight into the Lives of Mon IDPs in Halockhani, Southeast Burma** (January 2015)

### Reports

**The Border Consortium (TBC): Programme Report** July-December 2014. (March 2015)

**ND-Burma: Human Rights Situation in Burma**. July-December 2014. (March 2015)

**Karen Rivers Watch (KRW): Afraid to Go Home: Recent Violent Conflict and Human Rights Abuses in Karen State**. (November 2014)

**The Border Consortium (TBC): Protection and Security Concerns in Southeast Burma/Myanmar**. (November 2014)

**Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT). Silent Offensive: How Burma Army Strategies Are Fuelling the Kachin Drug Crisis**. (October 2014)

## LATEST STORIES AND VOICES

### *Please Support Our People, Not the Government – They Are Cheating the World': Mahn Robert Ba Zan*



*Mahn Robert Ba Zan is a former Karen freedom fighter and an advisor to the Karen Communities of Minnesota. He served in the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) for more than 30 years, following in the footsteps of his father Mahn Ba Zan, the first commander of the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO) and a former President of the Karen National Union (KNU).*

My father formed the united front. He was the founder of NDF [National Democratic Front]. His dream was that we will win the war with a united front. Every ethnic as one front and one command to fight.

At the time NDF was very good and very strong. They had northern front, eastern front, and southern front. The enemy was scared. They were scared so they wanted to split NDF.

The Burmese military has many divisions. But we don't mind. We have a lot of ethnic groups. We know the places and we know the terrain. They don't know. So we can fight and win revolution with united front. [Read the full story on the website](#)

### *Karenni Refugee in Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp: 'I Stay Here So I Feel Safe'*



*John Bosco is like any 23-year-old who dreams of good education and a career, and who likes to read, use the internet, and play football. Unlike many young people, however, John's life is confined within the fences of Ban Mai Nai Soi refugee camp in Thailand.*

## WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW?

- **Violent police crackdown on student protesters**

Student protests demanding democratic education are violently cracked down in March - dozens injured and 100 students arrested.

- **Peaceful protester shot by the police**

Police open fire at peaceful demonstrators in Letpadaung in December, injuring up to 20 and killing one woman protester.

- **UNHCR verification begins in the refugee camps**

Although told not to be an official registration, most refugees seem to think that the verification will give them a chance to resettle in a third country, as they have told Burma Link.

- **Major Burmese military offensives in northern Burma**

Burma Army attacks the MNDAA in Kokang Self-Administered Zone displacing at least 40,000 – 50,000 people; Government troops now clash almost daily with ethnic armies in Shan and Kachin States.

- **Sporadic conflict continues in Karen and Mon States**

Clashes in October between the DKBA and government troops – Over 2,000 fled, at least four civilians killed and countless of others reported human rights abuse, more clashes in March.

- **Burma Army-run civilian abuse in continues**

Local sources claim Burma Army killed 100 civilians during the Kokang offensive; Rape and murder of two Kachin teachers; Killings and torture continue in Shan and Kachin States; Local freelance journalist Par Gyi tortured and killed in Burma Army custody.

- **Peace talks amidst armed offensives**

The 7<sup>th</sup> round of talks was held in Rangoon (March 2015) whilst government troops launched huge military offensives involving air strikes. On March 31<sup>st</sup>, the ethnic NCCT and the government's UPWC agreed in principle to a draft NCA text that may be signed in the future.

- **Backtracking on the reform process**

The UN Special Rapporteur again warned of signs of further backtracking; Burma ranked as the 8<sup>th</sup> worst jailer of journalists; In January 2015, four times more political prisoners in Burma than one year before; National Race and Religion Protection Package submitted to the Parliament despite loud objections from civil society.

- **Government's instrumental role in drug crisis**

Kachin Women's Association Thailand's report (November 2014) shows regime involved in the drug crisis, [Burma Link's article \(March 2015\)](#) discusses the role of the government in creating the drug crisis and drug epidemic in northern Burma.

Lahu New Year celebrated in Kyaington, Eastern Shan State, on January 22, 2015.



"...Young people in my village, when they can't afford for their livelihood, they go and work outside the village like Taunggyi and Thailand or Malaysia. Most of young people go and work to earn money there for their livelihood. For people who go and work in Malaysia or other countries, it cost a lot for them to go there. So they have to sell a lot of things that they have... [For the full story go to Burma Link's website](#)

### ***Lway Chee Sangar: Reclaiming Rights After a Childhood of Labor, Hardship, and Conflict***



***"We had never heard about human rights in the village," Lway Chee Sangar tells me at the Palaung Women's Organization (PWO) office in Mae Sot, Thailand. Sangar is 23 years old. The ethnic nationality group to which she belongs, called the Palaung or Ta'ang, has been caught in an armed struggle for self-determination against the brutal Burmese regime for the better part of the past five decades.***

"...Because at that time I knew the situation in my village and outside my village, in the township, and other women, I knew it was very difficult. Not balanced in our village and other towns, other places. So I thought, 'I have lost my rights and my life, a lot, when I was young, until now. I didn't know anything...."

...But at that time I didn't know, we had never heard about human rights in the village. Not only me. In our group of people, none of us knew what they were teaching meant. We were just listening. After three months they sent us to go back to the village. After two months, I lived in the village; they called us again for the second training. In the second training I started to know what human rights are, and I know that all humans, if we are human, we have rights. I started to understand. And women's rights, child's rights, a little, I started to know." [Read full story on the website.](#)

### ***Ta'ang (Palaung) Leader Tar Aik Bong: 'Without proper political solutions, there will be no long lasting peace'***



**Tar Aik Bong is a leader of the Ta'ang (Palaung) people, one of Burma's ethnic nationalities that continues a daily struggle for survival in largely inaccessible areas in northern Shan State. He joined the Ta'ang liberation movement in 1987, and currently serves as Chairman of Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF) and Head of the military commission of Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). TNLA is one of the few ethnic armies that continues to fight against the Burma army and vows not to lay down arms until equal rights and a lasting political solution is achieved...**

"... We noted that if we do not take serious action against drug issues, nobody else will need to kill the Ta'ang people as they will ruin themselves and die of drug related issues such is the spread of the problem. That is why, in the last two years, we were able to destroy more than 1,000 acres of opium farms in Ta'ang regions and have seized large amount of drugs in our regions and burned the drugs that we were captured. No matter how the Burmese army and its local militias have continued to block our drugs eradication programs, we will continue to implement our eradication policy as much as we possibly can." [Read the full story on the website](#)

## **PWO Part One: 'It's the women and children that are suffering'**

**The Palaung Women's Organization (PWO) has developed an impressive range of programs to empower Palaung women and support and advocate for their communities in the war-torn, drug-ravaged areas in northern Burma—all while combatting gender-discrimination and an epidemic of domestic violence.**

"...They cannot work for everything [they need] for their life, for food, they have to just live in the village. If they don't have food they can ask their uncle and aunt, like this. Also, the children cannot go to school because when we have fighting the teachers don't want to live in our village. Because they're afraid of the conflict. So, they go home, they close school for one month, one week, two weeks, like this." [Read the full story on the website](#)

## **PWO Part Two: Empowering Women Whilst Facing Conflict, Poverty, and an Opiate Epidemic**

**You can't visit all the areas where the Palaung Women's Organization (PWO) works. Even if you could get past the many arms of Burma's military regime that keep foreigners away, you wouldn't want to. You would have to face bloody conflict between armed ethnic resistance groups and the expanding military junta, crippling lack of resources, infrastructure, healthcare, and communication, not to mention the widespread opium cultivation and addiction.**

"... Before, we [the PWO] had a crisis center in China. When we could not work inside Burma, we based one crisis center in China. We had name cards and also pamphlets. If the worker who was staying in China had, like, a holiday or Sunday, if they wanted any help they could just call us. Some people, if they know that someone was trafficked by someone, they could just call us. And then we went and met them. We tried our best. Sometimes we had to face the police, Chinese police. But we did our best helping them. If they wanted to give money for them, and then we just give money and then call them back [to Burma]." [Read full the story on the website](#)

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**Burma Link is an all-volunteer organisation. You can support us by donating, volunteering, or becoming a member.**

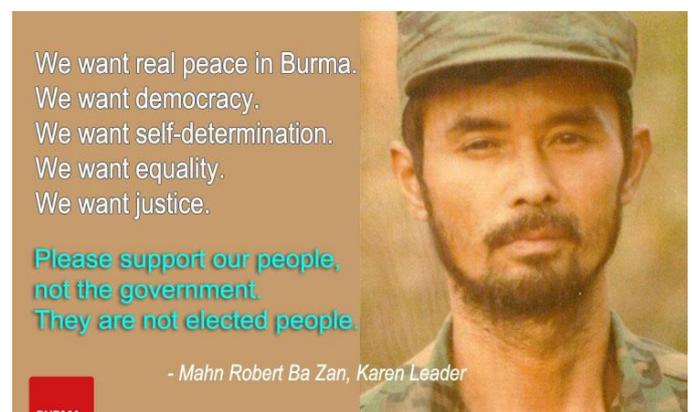
## **'If I Really Try Hard Nothing Is Impossible': From Collecting Recyclables to Higher Education**



**Naw Eh is an incredibly determined 20-year-old Karen woman whose perseverance, motivation and hopeful spirit have taken her far beyond what she ever could have imagined as a child. Growing up as an undocumented migrant under extreme poverty and lack of opportunity, unlike many others in Thailand young Naw Eh had no chance to go to school. Instead, she spent her mornings selling snacks to school children, before starting her daily round of looking after the household and collecting recyclables on the streets. Naw Eh was 12 years old when she finally had the opportunity to go to school. This is her account on how education, trying incredibly hard, and never giving up, has changed her life and led her towards light and new opportunities.**

"But when I was on grade six in Umphiem camp, I found a way. I wanted to study outside, like Hsa Htoo Lei or CDC [the Children's Development Centre at Mae Tao Clinic] or somewhere else. I thought that outside school is better than camp, because some of my friends, they were very good at English and Thai. They were so clever and (I thought) *oh I want to learn like that also*. So I decided that before I pass grade ten I should be able to speak English very well. I decided, so I found a way." [Read the story on the website.](#)

## **Featured quote**



[burmalink.org/please-support-people-government-mahn-robert-ba-zan](http://burmalink.org/please-support-people-government-mahn-robert-ba-zan)



**Burma Link**  
**Voices for Change**

[burmalink.org](http://burmalink.org)  
[office@burmalink.org](mailto:office@burmalink.org)