

# Burma Link Annual Report



**BURMA  
LINK**

Produced by Burma Link

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*“A small group of thoughtful people can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”*

*- Margaret Mead*

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

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*Burma Link advocates for Burma's ethnic nationalities and displaced people,  
and shares their voices and stories locally and internationally.*

# Message from the Founder

Burma Link started 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. Despite challenging conditions and extremely limited resources, we have managed to build a non-profit organisation that is now widely known among local and international organisations involved in Burma issues. We have come a long way, and I am excited to review our successes, challenges, and achievements for the year 2015, our second full year of operation.

In 2015, we continued collecting and publishing stories and interviews of ethnic leaders, freedom fighters, former political prisoners, refugees, and women activists, to name but a few. The top story on Burma Link's website received 837 Facebook recommendations/shares, and we also published interviews and opinion pieces in Burmese news media, including The Irrawaddy, Karen News, and Mizzima. Burma Link's website and social media platforms have steadily increased their reach, the website having an average of more than 400 visits per day for the year 2015.

Throughout the year, we worked on publishing a book of life stories, "Lives on the Line: Voices for Change from the Thailand-Burma Border," after successfully raising the funds for the project through an online crowdfunding platform. The book is the first of its kind, bringing stories of Burma's ethnic nationalities from the border area to local and international audiences in Burmese and English. We held a soft launch for the English book on December 16th in Mae Sot, where we sold out our limited edition of 100 books. Many of the storytellers also attended the occasion as special guests to show their support for the project.

In 2015, Burma Link also collaborated with Burma Partnership on a briefing paper "Voices of Refugees – Situation of Burma's Refugees Along the Thailand-Burma Border," which was published online in English on April 27, and in Burmese on June 20. All the 20 interviews for the paper were conducted by Burma Link members in different Thai border refugee camps. Burma Link was also one of the organisations to produce the 2015 Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Refugees and Displaced Persons (Burma/Myanmar).

We are particularly proud of our achievements considering that Burma Link is still run by non-paid volunteers who are driven by sheer passion and determination. From the bottom of my heart, I want to thank everyone who has been involved in making the year 2015 a success. We are now focusing our efforts on securing funding that will allow us to hire full time salaried staff members and take our organisational activities to the next level.

April 22, 2016

Ariana Zarleen, Program Director

# Summary

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Burma Link is a growing non-profit organisation that was set up in August 2012 to address vital unmet needs affecting Burma's ethnic nationalities and displaced people. Although the ethnic plight plays a central role in the lack of freedom, peace, and democracy in Burma, ethnic voices have been increasingly silenced since 2011 as the world has turned its attention towards central Burma. Burma Link works to ensure that the voices of Burma's ethnic nationalities and displaced people as well as the diverse Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and groups that represent them are heard in Burma's reform process. We work in cooperation with numerous ethnic, capacity building, human rights, media, as well as armed and political organisations that represent various ethnicities from Burma.

## History and Introduction

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This report describes the activities and key achievements of Burma Link during the year 2015.

Burma Link is a legally registered non-profit non-governmental organisation made up of people from Burma and around the world. We come from various cultural and professional backgrounds, some of us refugees on the Thailand-Burma border and others born and educated in Western societies. We all believe that at this critical time of change in Burma, upholding the voices of all Burma's people is more important than ever.

Burma Link was founded by foreign specialists in the field of ethnic and international relations together with refugees from Burma in August 2012 in Mae La refugee camp, Thailand.

As Burma Link's work is focused on highly sensitive issues such as amplifying the voices of organisations that include both unlawful associations in Burma and refugees in the camps in Thailand, it has not been possible to register Burma Link in Burma or in Thailand. Burma Link was legally registered as a non-profit organisation in Finland on August 29, 2013 (reg.no. 210.930).

Since 2013, Burma Link has been collecting stories from refugees, ethnic leaders, jungle medics, women activists, former political prisoners, migrant students, and freedom fighters along the Thailand-Burma border. These are unheard stories of incredible spirit and resilience, stories of courage, and voices of hope and dreams that have emerged from decades of oppression. Burma Link also regularly publishes in-depth issue-focused interviews with ethnic and women leaders. In December 2015, Burma Link organised a soft launch for the English book [“Lives on the Line: Voice for Change from the Thailand-Burma Border,”](#)



## 2015 Key Events

### December

Soft launch held for Burma Link's English book "Lives on the Line" in Mae Sot and limited edition of 100 books is sold out.

### December

Burma Link participates in APRRN Refugee Rights and Advocacy training in Bangkok.

### June

Burmese briefing paper "Voices of Refugees" published online.

### May

Funds raised for the book "Lives on the Line" through Indiegogo crowdfunding platform.

### April

English Briefing paper "Voices of Refugees" published online.

### March

Burma Link jointly produces the 2015 Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Refugees and Displaced Persons (Burma/Myanmar).

### January to March

Burma Link conducts interviews with 20 refugees in four different camps for the joint briefing paper with Burma Partnership.

which brings a collection of ten stories of Burma's ethnic nationalities from the border area to an international audience.

Burma Link continues to advocate for all parties to uphold and respect the voices and rights of Burma's refugees. In 2015, Burma Link collaborated with Burma Partnership on a briefing paper "[Voices of Refugees – Situation of Burma's Refugees Along the Thailand-Burma Border](#)," which was published online in English on April 27, 2015, and in Burmese on June 20, 2015. Burma Link was also one of the organisations to produce the 2015 Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Refugees and Displaced Persons (Burma/Myanmar).

In November 2013, we organised our first training, the AOC (Agents of Change) Leadership Program, in Mae Sot on the Thailand-Burma border. In 2014, we held another three trainings with altogether 24 participants who have become part of Burma Link's AOC Network. The program aims at developing essential life and leadership skills such as confidence, honesty and courage, problem solving and dealing effectively with others. During 2015, we transformed the training into an intensive 3-day Empowered Life and Leadership Skills (ELLS) course that will be made publically accessible for all motivated teachers and trainers in English and Burmese languages.

Burma Link operates with volunteer staff members, local and international interns, and AOCs, all of whom are deeply committed to our Vision, Mission and Values. In addition, a Governing Board made up of four professionals from Burma and around the world representing Burma Link's members provides overall sanctioning of Burma Link's operation.

Ever since founding the organisation, Burma Link has utilised a host of contacts on the Thailand-Burma border and across the world, including Burmese pro-democracy, capacity building, human rights and women's organisations, and local community leaders from various ethnic backgrounds as well as artists and international aid workers and journalists. We believe that cooperation is the key to create a shared view of positive change in Burma and to work effectively towards it.

## Background

Burma has experienced one of the biggest humanitarian crisis and most protracted refugee situations in the world. Millions of people from



Burma, mostly ethnic nationalities in the country's borderlands, have fled armed conflicts and Burmese military run war crimes and human rights abuses that have spanned over several decades. Despite recent changes in Burma's political landscape, abuse continues in ethnic areas.

The civil war in Burma that started with the Karen armed opposition in 1949, following a failure to reach a political agreement, has been dubbed as the longest ongoing conflict in the world. The Burma Army, in order to defeat ethnic armed opposition, has targeted their military campaigns against ethnic civilians. The result has been ongoing persecution of ethnic villagers and destruction of more than 3,500 ethnic villages. As the government has exerted repressive military control over the resource rich ethnic borderlands all over the country, ethnic armies have fought to protect their lands and their people, and ethnic civilians have suffered the consequences.

The voices of Burma's ethnic nationalities have been silenced and suppressed for decades, and largely remain unheard inside Burma. The country's education system promotes the government's views and discourages critical thinking. Few have developed an understanding of the reasons for the conflict and its human consequences, and many have adopted the military government-pushed view that ethnic armies are waging a war to tear the country apart. Meanwhile, ethnic nationalities have endured killings, beatings, torture, forced labour, forced relocations, and the use of rape as a weapon of war, all committed in a culture of impunity.

The recent changes in Burma's political landscape and ceasefires signed between the Burma Army and some prominent ethnic resistance groups have given a misleading image that peace is within reach. Meanwhile, large scale offensives in northern Burma and increasing militarisation in ceasefire areas continue. Initial ceasefires have proven to be fragile and regularly breached, inclusive political dialogue is yet to begin, and Burma is still far from achieving a country-wide nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA). Until there are solutions to the political goals of ethnic resistance groups that address the root causes of the conflict, there will be no peace or freedom for the ethnic people of Burma.

Over the years, at least three million people have fled Burma, whilst more than 600,000 remain internally displaced, most of them in eastern Burma. Hundreds of thousands have fled conflict and persecution to neighbouring Thailand, where more than 100,000 refugees still reside in nine official refugee camps. In addition, thousands of majority Burman civilians, usually due to their involvement in the political pro-democracy struggle, have crossed the border to flee from the repressive government. The Thailand-Burma border, during the past decades, has become home not only to scores of exiles who have fled their home for numerous reasons, but also to a highly organised movement that continues to work towards a free, peaceful, and democratic Burma.

Whilst the National League for Democracy's landslide victory in the 2015 election gives much hope for change, the constitution guarantees that the Burmese military still has ultimate power, and the military's offensives and human rights violations in ethnic areas can carry on with impunity. For countless of ethnic civilians in exile and in Burma's borderlands, peace process is a priority and constitutional change a necessity.

The ethnic plight plays a central role in the lack of freedom and democracy in Burma. One of the best ways to measure the extent of Burma's reforms and progress is to listen to the vulnerable ethnic

communities in Burma's borderlands. Ethnic people in Burma's borderlands and refugees and exiles in Thailand are a central part of the solution, and it is imperative that their voices are heard at this critical time of change in Burma.

Burma Link has developed a number of activities in order to amplify the voices of Burma's ethnic nationalities and displaced populations along the Thailand-Burma border.

## Vision

Burma Link envisions a free, peaceful and democratic Burma that upholds the voices of its people. We envision the people of Burma achieving full human rights, justice and equality, and becoming active agents in driving positive change in their lives and communities. We believe in an inclusive and fair constitution, the rule of law and accountability as preconditions for national reconciliation. We envision a future where the people of Burma find love and forgiveness in their hearts, celebrate and respect diversity, and work together towards a brighter future for all peoples of Burma.

## 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. Burma Link connects the people of Burma with each other and the world by projecting their voices into local and global conversations so as to inspire and enable them to become active players in transforming their situation towards one of hope, dignity and inclusion. Burma Link also promotes unity and national reconciliation through facilitating communication and information exchange between different peoples of Burma. Burma Link is committed to helping both local and international actors take effective and just action to help the people of Burma, by providing them with easy access to background information and recent developments inside the country and around its troubled borders.

## Values

### 1. Freedom, equality, dignity, and respect

- We reaffirm that all people are born free and equal and all have the right to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of their differences in ethnicity, gender, age, religion, culture, customs and traditions
- We recognise that all people are individuals who have the right to freedom of thought, conscience, speech, expression and religion
- We respect diversity and are committed to openness and non-discrimination.



## 2. Passion, commitment, and excellence

- We are passionate about our vision and deeply committed to our values and mission
- We constantly strive for excellence in everything we do, and challenge ourselves to the highest levels of learning, professionalism and performance to achieve greater impact.

## 3. Integrity, trust, and responsibility

- We are open, honest and direct in our communication with each other and all our stake holders
- We act consistently with our mission, being honest and transparent in what we do and say, and accept responsibility for our collective and individual actions.

## 4. Empowerment, community involvement, and cooperation

- We believe that people have the right to make their own decisions and control their own lives
- We are committed to upholding the voices of the people of Burma, and reaffirm that change and efforts to build peaceful and just society should be led by people from that society
- We recognise the value of cooperation and partnership and believe that creating a shared vision and working effectively towards it is essential for bringing about positive change in Burma.

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*We are deeply passionate about Burma issues and genuinely care about the country's future and the people of Burma. We would never jeopardise anyone's identity or dignity in order to "get a good story." We respect the people's feelings and concerns and will always put them before media coverage or anything else. We consistently work with high levels of respect and consideration for the people of Burma in everything we do.*

# Goals

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## (1) Help the people of Burma reach out and have their voices heard

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 Burmese 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 actions, 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.

## (2) Help the world reach in and understand the dynamics behind the situation inside the country and on the Thailand-Burma border

As the international community is shifting its policies toward Burma, it is arguably of crucial importance that they are aware of the conditions inside the country and around its borders. All attempts to address the humanitarian crisis and promote positive developments in Burma require a clear acknowledgement and awareness of the local context. Having access to local voices and people's stories can help international actors feel more empathy and get more involved, learn more about the situation and gear them towards more just and effective action.

## (3) Help the people of Burma understand the dynamics behind the situation inside the country and on the Thailand-Burma border

At this critical time of change in Burma's political landscape, it is arguably of crucial importance that the people of Burma are aware of the conditions inside the country and around its borders, and understand the underlying dynamics behind the prolonged conflict and suffering. If Burma is to celebrate unity in diversity, Burma's ethnic groups need to learn about and communicate with one another.

# Activities and Outcomes

The logo for BURMA LINK, featuring the words "BURMA" and "LINK" stacked vertically in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters on a red rectangular background.

*We are the link between the world and the people of Burma, helping the world reach in and the people of Burma reach out. We help the people share information and their stories with both local and global communities and provide all actors easy access to a wealth of information on Burma and its borders in order to gear them towards effective and just action to help the people of Burma and the country. Our main focus is on Burma's long-silenced ethnic nationalities and displaced people.*

**Table 1. Summary of Burma Link's goals, activities and outcomes in 2015**

<b>GOAL (1) Help the people of Burma reach out and have their voices heard</b>	
<b>Goal</b>	<b>Activity/Outcome</b>
1.1. Publish voices of the people of Burma on Burma Link's website	Published stories of 14 people of Burma from diverse backgrounds, including freedom fighters, ethnic and women leaders, students, and refugees. Altogether we published 20 stories or interviews about people and organisations on the border.
1.2. Broaden the audience and reach for voices of the people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Published voices on our English website, which' audience has steadily increased.</li> <li>Translated voices into Burmese and published on our Burmese website.</li> <li>Published a special refugee issue newsletter in June 2015 and started publishing regular e-newsletters in July 2015.</li> <li>Published one interview in Mizzima online and print newspaper in English and Burmese.</li> <li>Published several opinion pieces in a variety of publications, in particular Burmese domestic media such as Democratic Voice of Burma, Karen News, Mizzima, and The Irrawaddy.</li> </ul>
1.3. Undertake projects that let the voices of the people be heard	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continued the interviewing and storytelling project throughout the year.</li> <li>Published a joint refugee voice briefing paper with Burma Partnership in English and Burmese.</li> <li>Held a soft launch for English book "Lives on the Line."</li> <li>Translated and edited the Burmese book "Lives on the Line."</li> </ul>
1.4. Manage Agents of Change Leadership Program	Translated AOC materials into Burmese and created a 3-day Empowered Life and Leadership Skills (ELLS) course in English and Burmese.
<b>GOAL (2) Help the world reach in and understand the dynamics behind the situation inside the country and on the Thailand-Burma border</b>	
<b>Goal</b>	<b>Activity/Outcome</b>
2.1. Provide international actors with easy access to information on Burma Link's website	Burma Link's English website provides international actors with a host of background information as well as a comprehensive collection of resources on Burma and the Thailand-Burma border. Throughout the year 2015, we updated the background information as well as the collection library. We regularly published reports and press releases particularly by local CBOs.
2.2. Broaden international audience and reach.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The English website average audience was over 400 visits per day for the year 2015, according to conservative <i>Awstats</i>. According to <i>Webalizer</i>, the average was over 700 visits per day for the year.</li> <li>Started publishing electronic English newsletters.</li> <li>Burma Link's English Facebook page had over 2,000 followers at the end of the year.</li> <li>Burma Link's Twitter had over 300 followers at the end of the year.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Burma Link started using Instagram in July 2015.</li> </ul>
<b>GOAL (3) Help the people of Burma understand the dynamics behind the situation inside the country and on the Thailand-Burma border</b>	
<b>Goal</b>	<b>Activity/Outcome</b>
3.1. Provide local actors with easy access to information on Burma Link's website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Burma Link's Burmese website provides local actors with a host of background information on the situation in Burma and on the Thailand-Burma border as well as a comprehensive collection of resources that we updated as new publications were released.</li> <li>During the year, we published two stories of people of Burma on the Burmese website.</li> <li>We translated and edited the book "Lives on the Line" in Burmese to be sold in book shops inside Burma.</li> </ul>
3.2. Broaden Burmese audience and reach	Burma Link's Burmese Facebook page had more than 3,400 followers at the end of the year.

## Interviews and Stories

Since 2013, Burma Link has been collecting stories from refugees, ethnic leaders, jungle medics, women activists, former political prisoners, migrant students, and freedom fighters along the Thailand-Burma border. These are unheard stories of incredible spirit and resilience, stories of courage, and voices of hope and dreams that have emerged from decades of oppression. Burma Link also regularly publishes in-depth issue-focused interviews particularly with ethnic and women leaders. Stories and issue-focused interviews on the website – <http://www.burmalink.org/voices/>.

Throughout the year 2015, Burma Link worked towards publishing a book, "[Lives on the Line: Voices for Change from the Thailand-Burma Border](#)," that features a collection of life stories from the border area. These collected stories provide an inside perspective to the conflict, the history, and the current situation from those who have experienced it first-hand. The soft launch for the English book was held in Mae Sot on December 16, 2015, where we sold out our limited edition of 100 copies. See Burma Link's successful crowdfunding campaign for the book of life stories on Indiegogo – <http://igg.me/at/burma-voices>.



During the year 2015, we published altogether 20 stories or interviews on our English website, and two stories or interviews on our Burmese website. The stories included people from various different backgrounds, including refugees in the camps on the Thailand-Burma border, freedom fighters and

ethnic armed leaders, former political prisoners, and leaders and staff of ethnic organisations on the border. Ethnicities of the people included Karen, Burman, Karenni, Kayan (Padaung), Kachin, Arakanese (Rakhine), and Ta'ang (Palaung).

## 2015 TOP INTERVIEWS

### 1. 'The Government Is Playing the Game': Karen Major General Nerdah Bo Mya

*Published April 7 – 837 Facebook recommendations/shares*



Nerdah Bo Mya is a Major General and the Chief of Staff of the Karen National Defence Organization (KNDO), which was founded in 1947 to protect the Karen people and territory, and is under its mother organisation Karen National Union (KNU). Nerdah Bo Mya, 48, was born near Manerplaw—the former headquarters of the KNU as well as other ethnic nationalities and the pro-democracy movement—as the son of the late General Bo Mya who was the President of the KNU from 1976 to 2000. After being educated in Thailand and in the US, where Nerdah Bo Mya spent six years studying a Liberal Arts degree at a university in California, the young graduate turned away from a future in the US and soon returned to the Thailand-Burma border. For over 20 years, he has fought for “freedom, democracy, and humanity,” against what is undoubtedly one of the most brutal military regimes in the world. This dedicated and empathetic “rebel” leader

emphasizes that it is not just the Karen people but a whole nation of 60 million people who are still suffering and need to be freed. Although the international community has enjoyed what some call a honeymoon with the Burmese government since the country started opening up in 2011, according to Nerdah Bo Mya, the government is still not showing signs of sincerity in peace talks nor genuine willingness to change. “The government is playing the game,” he says, and the international community too often indirectly participating in ongoing atrocities. In this exclusive interview with Burma Link, Nerdah Bo Mya talks about the struggle, the current state of the ceasefire and the peace process, the role of the international community, and how to build a prosperous Burma for the future generations.

“I want to tell the people that the ceasefire situation right now is useless. We cannot trust the government, the government is not sincere for peace talks. They just want to lie to get money, get rid of all the ethnic groups, committing more crimes, committing genocide against the ethnic people. That’s all they want. The mentality is that they don’t change, they just take out their uniforms and inside the same thing. They, you know, they’re not changing at all. Actually, they’re just playing the game. I want to also warn the international community that if they want to invest in Burma they have to talk and listen to many sides before they invest or put money into business in Burma. Otherwise they’re just indirectly killing innocent people....” Read [full story on the website](#).

### 2. 'The International Community Must Stop Funding Gvt's Attacks on Kachin Civilians: Moon Nay Li, General Secretary of KWAT

*Published August 3, 2015 - 394 Facebook recommendations/shares*





Moon Nay Li is the General Secretary of the Kachin Women's Association Thailand (KWAT), an organisation which she joined in 2002 in order to work for her people and community. The KWAT was founded on September 9th 1999 in response to recognising the urgent need for women to organise themselves to help solve the growing social and economic problems in the Kachin State. In 1994, the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) / Kachin Independence Army (KIA) was the first to negotiate a ceasefire with the junta but promises of investment in the infrastructure in Kachin State were not realised. Instead, the military regime authorised and benefited from large-scale extraction of the state's natural resources, benefits which were not shared with the Kachin people. Similar developments can be currently observed in the Karen State where the 2012 ceasefire has

led to increased development projects and land grabbing. The war in the Kachin State was re-ignited four years ago in June 2011, and despite the Burma Government's claims to be promoting peace, the conflict situation has worsened during 2015 and the government troops have continued their military build-up in Kachin and northern Shan State, launching large-scale offensives, including aerial bombings, which are devastating ethnic communities. Over 120,000 are estimated to have been displaced since 2011. Despite the large scale devastation, the international community is engaging with the Burma Government, having lifted sanctions and effectively funding the Burmese military's ongoing attacks against ethnic civilians. In spite of KWAT's repeated calls for justice, impunity is continuing for these crimes. Burma Army has shown no signs for ceasing offensives, on the contrary, they have deployed more troops and intensified their attacks since the beginning of the year 2015. What is the response of the international community to these crimes? They are increasingly engaging with the government and pouring millions of dollars of aid to central Burma, whilst cutting aid to the growing number of Kachin IDPs. Meanwhile, the government continues to spend a huge amount of its annual budget on financing the army that continues to kill its own citizens.

The KWAT is very concerned that foreign aid and investment is serving to subsidise the government's war machine. As Moon Nay Li points out; "They (international community) are [giving] more support to the government, [but] now the government military has not stopped attacking the ethnic people." Instead of funding the government's offensives, "they have to give pressure to Burmese government to have real political dialogue in our country," says Moon Nai Li. "They have to know that (the real) situation and also have to give pressure, not listen only to the government side. But also they have to listen to the ethnic leaders and also the ground, and CBOs and ethnic people..." [Read full story on the website.](#)

### 3. 'We Are Not Rebels... We Fight for Democracy': Ta'ang (TNLA) Soldiers

Published July 13 - 134 Facebook recommendations/shares



Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), the armed wing of Palaung State Liberation Front (PSLF), is one of the ethnic resistance armed organisations that vows not to lay down arms until there is a guarantee of political negotiations. Burma Link spoke with two TNLA soldiers, Mai and Mai Main, who were sent by their leaders to study human rights and politics in Mae Sot, so that they could go back to Ta'ang land and educate other soldiers. These two soldiers studied in Mae Sot for a year, and believed it is their responsibility to go back to Burma to educate others and safeguard their people's rights. In this interview, they share their story on how and why they became

involved with the TNLA and why the Ta'ang people so strongly support their army. Mai and Mai Main, aged 23 and 26, are now back in the battle fields of northern Shan State.

"We must [have] unity. If we are not united, government soldiers will destroy us. If we get what we want, we want them (the government) to recognise our land. We want people to have education. We want people to have political knowledge and transportation..." [Read full story on the website.](#)

## 2015 TOP STORIES

### 1. 'I Want to See a Burma Where We Accept Diversity': Student Leader and Former Political Prisoner Sithu Maung

*Published October 20 - 399 Facebook recommendations/shares*



*The student movement has historically played a central role in the pro-democracy struggle in Burma. Sithu Maung, a 27-year-old university student is one of the many who have paid a heavy price for their involvement in the movement. Sithu Maung was arrested in 2007 for re-founding the outlawed All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU), and for his role in leading the 2007 Saffron Revolution. In September 2007, Sithu Maung participated in the peaceful demonstrations with monks and other protestors, demanding to be allowed to form student unions and calling for democracy. Sithu Maung witnessed his fellow students being shot by the military, and although he escaped the crackdown, authorities soon found him. Sithu Maung was sentenced to 11 years in prison. After his release in the 2012 amnesty for political prisoners, Sithu Maung continued his political activities and founded the Confederation of University Students' Unions (CUSU), which has played an active role in the recent negotiations for democratic education and in promoting the students' rights in Burma. Sithu Maung applied to the NLD (National League for Democracy) to be a candidate in the upcoming 2015 general election, but his application, along with all Muslim candidates, was rejected. Sithu Maung now dreams of preparing himself to become a member*

*of parliament one day and advocating for minority rights and dignity.*

"We give priority to two things – one is pressure, another one is compromise. These are our two ideas. That is we want to negotiate but we also want to give pressure to the Burmese government. So the senior students are in dialogue group with the government to discuss while the rest gives pressure to them. The result of impact that we discussed sometimes come from that pressure. In the dialogue way, there are two associations; ABFSU and CUSU..." [Read full story on the website.](#)

### 2. 'We Have Always Been Running': Why a Young Karen Woman Chose to Become a Soldier

*Published October 5 - 392 Facebook recommendations/shares*

*Naw Mu Gay, 22, wanted to join the Karen army since a young age. Coming from a large family, Naw Mu Gay's father found it hard to provide for everyone, having to work on a farm in order to exchange betel nut leaves for rice that was barely enough to feed his family. Attending a school far away from her village, Naw Mu Gay and her siblings had to live with their grandmother in Taungoo, seeing their parents only once a year during the school break. To help the family once her father fell ill, Naw Mu Gay had to drop out of school to work on a farm in the village. She and her family lived in constant fear of the Burma Army, often having to run to the jungle where the family would live in a broken tent, cooking only at night time when the smoke would not lead Burmese soldiers to their hideout. Naw Mu Gay grew up seeing her parents suffer amidst the conflict, and continuously having to run for their lives. This year, finally given the opportunity, Naw Mu Gay decided to join*





*the KNDO (Karen National Defense Organisation), and says that she will rely on her fellow comrades to get through the difficult times that lay ahead.*

*“Everyone joined the army. But as for me, I joined the army because I wanted to. Since I was a child I wanted to join. I hate [the Burmese army]. Since I was a child my parents suffered the military fights. I hate [it]. Therefore, I wanted to join the army. I had to help my parents. Just this year, I joined the army.*

*When I lived in the house [in the hill], I knew nothing. It was strange, the outside world. When I joined the army, there were boy soldiers there also. They help [with] what I cannot do. As for the girls, they teach each other what others don’t know. I teach them what they don’t know....”*  
Read [full story on the website](#).

### 3. ‘We Were Arrested, Please Tell the People!’: Former Political Prisoner – PART 1

*Published October 28 – 300 Facebook recommendations/shares*



*In 1996, Chit Min Lay was a young university student full of dreams, wishing to become a literature man and a poet. He was about to finish his four-year degree at the University of Rangoon when the young student became interested in politics and activism. At 22 years of age, he was among the youngest to participate in the student demonstrations in December 1996, the biggest since the countrywide 8888 uprising, when thousands had been killed in a brutal military crackdown. In the 1996 demonstrations nearly a decade later, Chit Min Lay and hundreds of others were beaten and arrested by the police, taken to a Burmese army camp, and intimidated before their release. After another student demonstration a few days later, authorities closed all the universities – Chit Min Lay and his fellow students went underground, and planned the next large scale demonstrations for August and September 1998. This time, Chit Min Lay was not released. He was sentenced for 31 years in prison.*

*“After they interrogated me they moved [me] to Insein prison. Insein prison is very, very big and we moved there. And we had to wait with no trial, for nearly six months. Because they were thinking that demonstrations will happen and happen; maybe they were thinking that we were leaders, or we will command to demonstrate again and again. The first week in prison was crazy for me, it was crazy... I thought that if they sentence [me] for one year, two years, I will die. The first week was very, very difficult. We were beaten and starved or something, I did not have enough food. [I was] always beaten and then after finished one week in the interrogation, I lived alone in the cell in a special compound. I thought they will sentence me soon. This was my thinking, ‘If they sentence me for one year or two years I will die...’ ”* Read [full interview on the website](#).

## Advocating for refugees and IDPs

At this critical time of change inside Burma and in the Thailand-Burma border camps, Burma Link continues to advocate for Burma's displaced populations, particularly refugees in Thailand and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in eastern Burma.

In 2015, Burma Link collaborated with Burma Partnership on a briefing paper "Voices of Refugees – Situation of Burma's Refugees Along the Thailand-Burma Border," which was published online in English on April 27, 2015, and in Burmese on June 20, 2015. The briefing paper was widely distributed to actors such as the Asia Human Rights Commission, Human Rights Watch, and the UNHCR as well as numerous international and local organisations involved in human rights and refugee issues. The briefing paper was initially launched and presented at the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples' Forum 2015 in Malaysia, which took place 22-24 April, 2015, and it was distributed at the International Conference on Burma/Myanmar studies at Chiang Mai University, which took place 24-26 July, 2015. The briefers were also distributed to the interviewers and all the interviewees that we were able to reach, and feedback regarding the process and the papers was welcomed and encouraged. The findings were also used in producing the 2015 Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review (UPR) on Refugees and Displaced Persons (Burma/Myanmar).

The 2015 briefing paper – <http://www.burmalink.org/briefing-paper-voices-of-refugees-situation-of-burmas-refugees-along-the-thailand-burma-border/>

Submission to the United Nations Universal Periodic Review on Refugees and Displaced Persons Burma/Myanmar - <http://www.burmalink.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Burmas-Refugees-and-IDPs-Submission-to-UN-Universal-Periodic-Review.pdf>

Burma Link's advocacy materials for the World Refugee Day on June 20, 2015 – <http://www.burmalink.org/calling-for-all-parties-to-uphold-the-voices-and-rights-of-refugees-along-the-thailand-burma-border/>

## AOC – Agents of Change

Burma Link's AOC Leadership Network is building a leadership and information sharing network model to empower communities and break the silence, through promoting the sharing of information, stories, and life experiences of communities from Burma and the Thailand-Burma border refugee camps locally and around the world. AOC stands for Agents of Change, empowered ethical leaders and role models who can inspire others and help their community voices be heard.

The AOC Leadership Program consists of two modules: (1) Empowered Life and Leadership Skills (ELLS), and (2) Storytelling and Information Sharing. The first three days of the program (ELLS) aim at developing essential life and leadership skills such as confidence, honesty and courage, responsible citizenship, and the ability to effectively deal with others. During the last two days, the participants

learn how to help their community members realize the value of their voice and have their stories heard. Upon successful completion of the intensive 5-day program, participants become part of Burma Link's AOC Leadership Network.

Burma Link currently has a network of 30 AOCs from various ethnic nationalities. Trainings have been conducted with graduate students from higher education schools on the border, including Wide Horizons, the Australian Catholic University (ACU), and Thoo Mweh Khee (TMK) (GED level).

In 2015, we paused the training activities and focused on developing the ELLS training modules in English and Burmese, which we aim to make widely available as a training module to promote ethical and empowered leadership with all youngsters from Burma.

### ***Examples from the training***



In a leadership activity that takes place after the first three days of empowerment training is finished, each participant gets a chance to lead their group in a timed challenge. This picture has been taken in Mae La camp by Dingo who was leading his group to complete a challenge of taking a picture that represents empowerment.



At the end of the training, participants choose and keep one picture card that is the most meaningful for them personally. Participants also explain to others why that card is particularly meaningful to them. This picture is from TMK.

# Media

Burma Link is committed to helping both local and international actors take effective and just action to help the people of Burma, by providing them with easy access to background information and recent developments inside the country and around its troubled borders. Our focus is especially on Burma's ethnic nationalities and displaced people, and amplifying the voices of local ethnic and women's organisations.

The information on Burma Link's English and Burmese websites are divided into three main parts; (1) Background Information, (2) Voices of the People, and (3) Resource Collection.

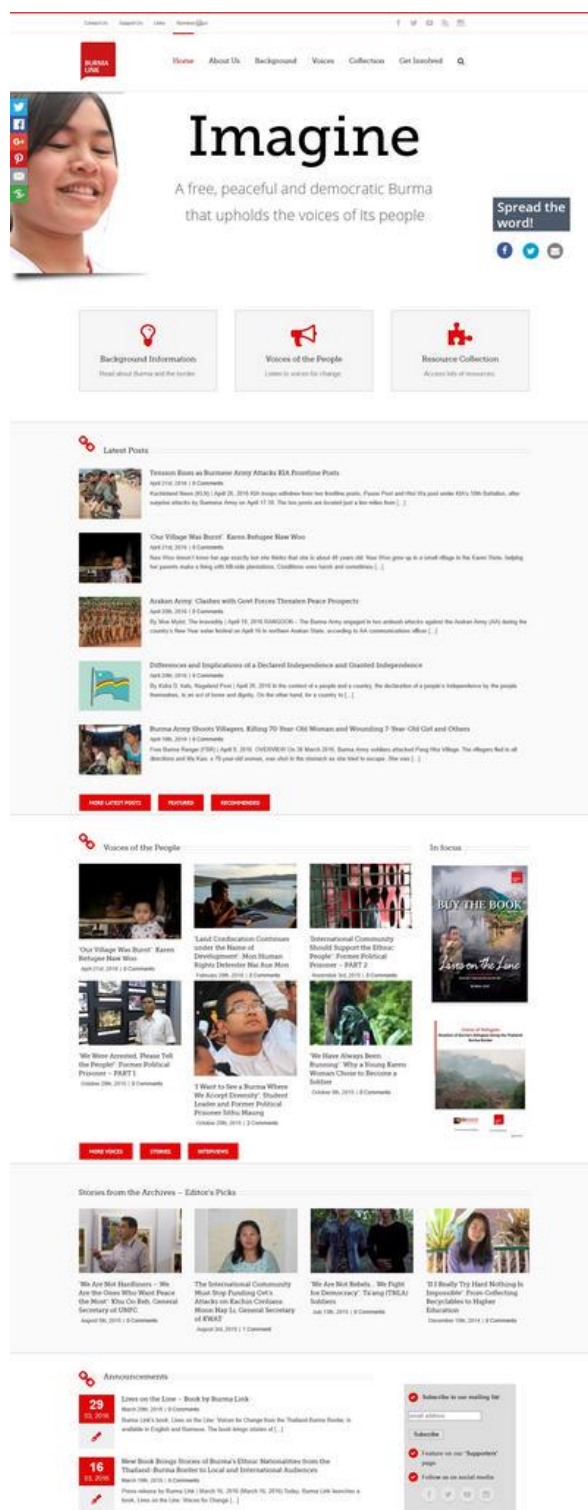
## English website

Burma Link's English website presents a host of background information on Burma and the Thailand-Burma border, the most comprehensive package of clearly referenced background information easily and freely accessible online. The website also creates a platform for the people of Burma to have their voices and stories heard, and includes a comprehensive collection of resources including reports, documentaries, news, articles and press releases. The website is updated every few days and we try to publish at least one life story or in-depth interview each month. The website can be accessed at <http://www.burmalink.org/>.

The background information has over 100 pages of clearly referenced information about Burma and the border, including images and statistics. The collection library includes news, press releases, and over 50 reports published by our partnering organisations. We also publish articles and documentaries as well as photo galleries put together by us and our website visitors.

## Burmese website

Burma Link's Burmese website presents a host of background information on Burma and the Thailand-Burma border, creates a platform for the people of Burma to have their voices heard locally, and includes a collection of key resources compiled from different sources. The Burmese website can be accessed at <http://burmese.burmalink.org/>.



## Social Media

- Facebook (English)

Burma Link's English Facebook page can be accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/burmalink>. The Facebook page had over 2,100 followers by the end of 2015.

- Facebook (Burmese)

Burma Link's Burmese Facebook page can be accessed at <https://www.facebook.com/burmalinkburmese>. The Facebook page had over 3,400 followers by the end of 2015.

- Twitter

Burma Link's Twitter account can be accessed at <https://twitter.com/burmalink>. We started using Twitter in late 2014 and had over 230 followers by the end of 2015.

- Instagram

Burma Link's Instagram account can be accessed at <https://instagram.com/burmalink/>. We started using Instagram in July 2015 and had 33 followers by the end of 2015.

- YouTube

Burma Link's YouTube account can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/user/burmalink>. We have made one short video about refugees on the border, which has nearly 12,000 views.

- E-newsletter

We publish an electronic newsletter once every one or two months. We started on June 20, 2015 with a special refugee issue newsletter. The newsletter has about 90 subscribers. Subscribe – <http://www.burmalink.org/subscribe/>

## Burma Link in other media

Burma Link has submitted several opinion pieces to a variety of publications, in particular Burmese domestic media. News outlets such as Democratic Voice of Burma, Karen News, Mizzima and The Irrawaddy have all published features and interviews by Burma Link in the last year, focusing on a variety of issues. In addition, Ariana Zarleen, the current Program Director, has been quoted in a number of international media.

The following are several links to Burma Link appearances in local and international press.

### 2015 Briefing paper "Voices of Refugees" in media:

Karen News. *Refugees Concerns Must be Address In Any Plans To Repatriate Them*. Published May 4, 2015, at <http://karennews.org/2015/05/refugees-concerns-must-be-address-in-any-plans-to-repatriate-them.html/>



**Publications by Ariana Zarleen (Program Director):**

Ariana Zarleen / The Irrawaddy. *Mon IDPs Concerned About Lack of Aid in Halockhani*. Published January 20, 2015, at <http://www.irrawaddy.com/feature/mon-idps-concerned-lack-aid-halockhani.html>

Ariana Zarleen / Mizzima. *"ကျနော်တို့က အမာလိုင်းသမားတွေ မဟုတ်ပါဘူး။ ငြိမ်းချမ်းရေးကို အလိုချင်ဆုံးသူတွေပါ။"* (Burmese translation of the article below). Published August 11, 2015, at <http://mizzimaburmese.com/article/3112>

Ariana Zarleen / Mizzima. *'We are not hardliners – we are the ones who want peace the most': Khu Oo Reh, General Secretary of UNFC*. Published August 3, 2015, at <http://mizzima.com/news/%E2%80%98we-are-not-hardliners-%E2%80%93-we-are-ones-who-want-peace-most%E2%80%99-khu-oo-reh-general-secretary-unfc>

Ariana Zarleen / Mizzima. *The Lahu yearn for better education for their children*. Published April 3, 2015, at <http://mizzima.com/lifestyle-features/lahu-yearn-better-education-their-children>

**Ariana Zarleen quoted in media:**

Michele Penna / Asian Correspondent. *Burma's ethnic areas are anything but peaceful despite recent ceasefire*. Published November 1, 2015, at <http://asiancorrespondent.com/2015/11/burmas-ethnic-areas-all-but-peaceful-despite-recent-ceasefire/>

Michele Penna / East Magazine. *Beyond the headlines, the war*. Published August 11, 2015, at <http://www.eastonline.eu/en/east-61/beyond-the-headlines-the-war>

Melanie Keyte / Democratic Voice of Burma. *Refugee students learn life's lessons*. Published July 17, 2015, at <https://www.dvb.no/news/refugee-students-learn-lifes-lessons/>

Abby Seiff / UCA News. *Generation gap widens in Thai border camps*. Published December 15, 2014, at <http://www.ucanews.com/news/generation-gap-widens-in-thai-border-camps/72599>

## Publications by Burma Link in other media:

H. Paladino & Ariana Zarleen / Shan Herald Agency for News. *Systematic and Widespread Drug Epidemic Destroying Ethnic Communities in Northern Burma*. Published March 4, 2015, at <http://english.panglong.org/systematic-and-widespread-drug-epidemic-destroying-ethnic-communities-in-northern-burma/>

H. Paladino & Ariana Zarleen / Kachinland News. *Systematic and Widespread Drug Epidemic Destroying Ethnic Communities in Northern Burma*. Published March 4, 2015, at <http://kachinlandnews.com/?p=25495>

## Identity

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Legal name:	Burma Link ry
Legal status:	Registered as a non-profit organisation
Registration number:	210.930
Date of Registration:	August 29, 2013
Based in:	Thailand
Email:	office@burmalink.org
English website:	<a href="http://www.burmalink.org/">http://www.burmalink.org/</a>
English Facebook:	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/burmalink">https://www.facebook.com/burmalink</a>
Burmese website:	<a href="http://burmese.burmalink.org/">http://burmese.burmalink.org/</a>
Burmese Facebook:	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/burmalinkburmese">https://www.facebook.com/burmalinkburmese</a>





*Burma Link advocates for Burma's ethnic nationalities and displaced people, and shares their stories and voices with the world.*



**BURMA  
LINK**

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

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