

Christian Freedom International *Bringing Hope to the Persecuted of Burma*

October 2003

By Janet Maxim

The official term for the Karen people of Burma is Externally Displaced Persons or “EDP”s, a bureaucratic euphemism if there ever was one. When you peel back that label, you discover the Karen are “Displaced” because the military junta ruling Burma is waging genocide against them and they are running for their lives. “Externally” means they are not even safe hiding in the tangled jungles of Burma; 130,000 have fled to refugee camps in bordering countries. And when you meet the “Persons” you find they too defy that bland definition. “In spite of enormous hardships, I have yet to find someone complain about their conditions or circumstances,” says Jim Jacobson, president of Christian Freedom International (CFI), which exists to bring relief “where others are not and cannot.”

Looking deeper, you wonder how you missed this country and its history. But most of us have. Yet the magnitude of its troubles should put it in the headlines right next to Rwanda and Kosovo. “The most barbaric methods imaginable,” is how *The Asian Wall Street Journal*¹ described the junta’s methods. In June news from Burma made it to the inside pages of American newspapers: the ruling junta tried once again to silence the pro-democracy movement, arresting its leaders, killing demonstrators, and closing universities.

While dictators and terrorists compete for the attention of overextended first-world nations, CFI hears the voice of the suffering Burmese. The organization strives to tell the world the story of these “EDPs.”

The Karen in Burma

Before British colonial rule Burma was a loose confederation of eight autonomous tribes—the Karen was the largest. In the early nineteenth century an American couple, Adoniram and

Nancy Judson, introduced Christianity to the Karen region in eastern Burma. Most Karen are now Christ-followers rather than Buddhists, the religion of eighty-nine percent of Burmese. In 1948 the Burmese, led by General Aung San, fought for and won independence from Britain. But the Karen did not receive the independent state they were promised. Still, in the two decades following, the tribes worked toward unity within a democratic structure under U Nu, who was appointed prime minister after Aung San was assassinated.

In 1962 General Ne Win seized power. He launched “The Burmese Way to Socialism,” nullified the Burmese constitution and began a military campaign to consolidate his power by eradicating ethnic loyalties. Originally called by the Orwellian euphemism “State Law and Order Restoration Council,” with the aptly monstrous acronym of SLORC, the regime created by Ne Win was later renamed “State Peace and Development Council,” or SPDC.


“Between a Rock and a Hard Place”

The life of Mimi Singh is a strand tightly woven into the tragic tale of Burma and the hope brought by CFI. Mimi’s life on the run began before she could walk. Born to a nurse and the township medical officer at KyawKywi hospital in Mandalay, Burma’s second largest city, she was the first of three children. Her parents had been under house arrest for colluding with Karen revolutionary forces. After their release in 1972, her father resigned from government service and with his family headed for the Thai-Burma border.

They travelled seven days mostly on foot—sometimes by elephant—over rugged mountains. In the thick tropical rainforests they found the village they were looking for: simple bamboo huts on stilts, perched on the steep banks of a ravine. Here they and eighty other families created a community without “necessities” such as electricity or indoor plumbing (water from a ravine flowed to the houses through split bamboo pipes). Yet the village had leaders, children attended one of three village schools, and most families worshipped daily at the church they built.

There Mimi grew in faith as the Karen people have for almost two centuries: “My mother’s devotion to Christ caused me to become a Christian. When I was a child I attended Sunday school and our teacher taught us about Jesus’ love as it is written in John 3:16: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that every one who believes in him will not

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perish but have eternal life.’ I accepted Jesus Christ as my salvation and was born again in October, 1984.”

This faith connects the Karen and other Burmese Christian minorities to their only hope, even while it places them in danger every day. This faith also impassions CFI to work in war zones.

Mimi’s father was the second doctor to serve the Karen cause. He volunteered with the Karen National Union (KNU),

It was frightful to see people running with no direction...several were hit with shrapnel and I saw them running with blood on their shirts. It was a terrible scene.

a government-in-exile, and moved his family to Wangkha trading post nearer the Thai border. While helping the KNU, Mimi’s father was away from home for extended periods and her mother became the sole breadwinner. She opened a small pharmacy and a video hall showing movies, and she sold shaved ices. “To raise us,” Mimi understates, “my mother worked very hard.”

Mimi remembers, “The military junta always planned to destroy the trading post and staged several offensives. Each time when we heard about their movement, the family had to leave the area and move to the Thai side or some safe place. The last time they attacked Wankha, in 1977, they used heavy guns. We all moved to the Thai side for safety believing that the Burmese troops would not be rash enough to shell Thai territory, but that was not the case.”

“The first shell fell on the Thai side around 2:30 p.m., while my mother was bathing us. Fire started and flame engulfed other parts of the market. My mother with the help of my father’s friend dragged and carried all the children and ran towards Maesot, Thailand. Everything was in commotion and confusion. It was frightful to see people running with no direction...several were hit with shrapnel and I saw them running with blood on their shirts. It was a terrible scene. The Wangkha market was totally destroyed within four hours.”

New Wangkha was established a few months later, and became the headquarters of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) as well as a thriving black-market trading post. Although once one of the wealthiest nations in Southeast Asia, the socialist dictatorship of Ne Win ruined Burma’s economy. Mimi says some two million kyat (6-7 kyat to the dollar) worth of goods cross the Thai-Burma border every day: “Textiles, motor spare parts, cycle spare parts, seasoning powder, cosmetics, flip-flops, medicine, paints, etc., used to go from Thailand into Burma. Whilst cattle, buffalo, gold, silver, animals

(stag, barking deer and their horns, tiger skin), baby crocodile, birds (parrot, Indian grackle or talking bird, peacock), came from Burma.” These goods still sustain most Burmese.

In 1984 New Wangkha was razed by the military and many of its young men were kidnapped and forced into service. But this time the villagers were warned by the KNU, who intercepted enemy radio communications. This enabled the villagers to pack and escape over the border into Thailand.

Life on the Run

For thirty-seven years the Burmese regime has treated its people this way. Last year in Chin State authorities held up a town water supply project and refused to connect telephone lines until local Christians tore down their crosses and built pagodas in their place. In Karen State villages have been attacked, houses and buildings burned, and rice stocks destroyed. Thousands have died in forced labor.² Amnesty International found the situation a “cause for grave concern...[needing] urgent steps to protect civilians from forced labor, extortion and land confiscation at the hands of its armed forces”.³

The SPDC and its allied local forces, the DKBA (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army), also search remote settlements to hunt down the estimated one million Internally Displaced Persons,⁴ particularly Christians, but also some Buddhists. They shoot all those who flee. Those who remain are forced to convert to Buddhism. Rape, murder and other atrocities await those who are steadfast in their faith. Soldiers burn villages and slaughter and eat the livestock. (SPDC forces are kept near starvation to inflame their appetites.) They plant landmines to prevent resettlement. Villagers are enslaved as porters or human mine-sweepers before the advancing army.

Those who make it over the border to refugee camps are hardly better off. They are still in danger of Burmese army incursions. They have no security because Thailand is not a signatory to any U.N. convention on refugees. With no legal status as refugees, the Karen have no rights or protection. CFI’s Jim Jacobson explains, “They are not recognized by Burma as Burmese nationals. They are not recognized by Thailand as Thai nationals. As a result, they have no way to obtain a passport or traveling credentials. They cannot leave the camps and assimilate into Thailand. They cannot go back to Burma because it is too dangerous. They are truly between a rock and a hard place.” The Karen can be trapped in a camp for years—unless the overburdened Thai government decides to repatriate them.

Pro-democracy Movements

The violence in Burma’s rural areas is mirrored in its cities and campuses. Pro-democracy dissent has been met consistently with “brute force,” according to the Free Burma Coalition

website⁵. Thousands of students have been imprisoned. A dozen were killed when the army blew up the Rangoon University student union building in retaliation for a 1976 student protest.

Students organized a massive national demonstration in August 1988, drawing “workers, monks, farmers, civil servants, housewives, teachers, schoolchildren, and thousands of members of the armed services.” Over 200,000 gathered in Rangoon. Government troops fired into the crowds, killing an estimated 10,000.⁶ The international outcry pressured Ne Win into stepping down and SLORC promised to hold a democratic election in 1990. Burma was renamed Myanmar.

One of the political parties formed at that time was the National League for Democracy. It was led by Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of freedom-fighter Aung San. Her party won over 82 percent of the parliamentary seats, but SLORC refused to yield power. Suu Kyi has been under house arrest since then, even though she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 and garnered vast popular support. Last June, violent clashes flared again and the junta reacted with further crackdowns.

CFI: Independent and Impassioned

Jim Jacobsen first visited Burma at the encouragement of Faith Whittlesey, US ambassador to Switzerland, whom he had met at a human rights conference. On that trip to Burma, Jacobson says, “I fell in love with the people. I was impressed by the Christ-like character of the Karen people. They take their Christianity seriously and live very decent, moral lives. The people are hard-working. Their families are strong and people

take care of each other.” He saw the Karen surviving “without electricity, and thus no telephones, televisions, radios, streetlights, refrigerators, computers, air conditioners, running water, or any other conveniences that may come from it. There are no motorized vehicles, no roads—only jungle trails. Life there is a place time forgot.” And they are a people the world forgot.

Whittlesey asked Jim, who had worked in the Reagan Administration and was a former legislative assistant to Senator Gordon Humphrey, to “spearhead a program to assist persecuted Christians.” In 1983 he launched CFI as the U.S. branch of Christian Solidarity International, which is based in Switzer-

They wanted CFI to be privately-funded, independent of the U.N. or E.U. “This step was and is important in that it allows CFI to go to places without the permission of international treaties.”

land.

The CSI-USA board had an “aggressive vision,” Jim says. It wanted CFI to be privately-funded and independent of the U.N. or E.U. “This step was and is important in that it allows CFI to go to places without the permission of international treaties, etc,” he adds. In 1995 the Board commissioned Jim to make CSI-USA self-sufficient. They chose well. Jim speaks quietly like a man who is confident he is fighting God’s battles, urgently like a man on a desperate mission, and passionately like a man who loves his job. CFI became independent in 1998 and is headquartered in Front Royal, Virginia. CFI workers now serve in five countries, their mission inspired by the Biblical command: “Remember the prisoners as if in prison with them and those who are persecuted...” (Hebrews 13:3). CFI’s mission “is to reach the part of the persecuted church that is the most repressed, the most cut off, the most isolated.”

In June, Jim, his wife and four children moved from Washington D.C., where the hot air comes from politicians, to the border of Burma, where the oppressive heat comes from both sun and tyrants. But you can’t judge the enormity of the challenge by his voice. Jim is excited, hopeful, and ready for “radical expansion.”

Medicine and Bibles

Mimi’s father began working with CFI in 1996. In January 2000, while in Thailand with the CFI medical team researching malaria, he died suddenly of a heart attack. “As I’m the elder daughter I have my own understanding that I must continue his work,” she says. “Also Mr. Jim Jacobson [CFI president], my family and friends of my father support me and encourage me.” Mimi now directs the CFI headquarters and its staff of five in

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Maesot, Thailand, “tend[ing] to the broken souls and bodies”⁷.

There are many broken bodies, for disease and landmine injuries claim more lives and limbs—averaging thirty a month—than the SPDC. And life on the run or in refugee camps is not conducive to good hygiene. People sleep on open-slat floors without mosquito netting. Under them livestock find shelter.

“CFI loves us, supports us and helps our people. I feel so happy because my dream became true.”

They use streams as both latrines and lavatories. The result: a fifty percent incidence of malaria, dysentery, typhoid, tuberculosis, and uterine infections. “[I]t’s essential that we reach them because they are dying from very treatable diseases,” Jim Jacobson explains.⁸

Medical care is the most desperate need for the 300,000⁹ Karen and other ethnics trying to camouflage themselves in the unforgiving jungles. The sick cannot come to the doctors, so CFI sends doctors to the sick in two ways: backpack medics and Freedom Hospitals. One medic’s story tells how they work:

Naw Beh Say Paw, now 24, has a compassion born of suffering. For years an illness troubled her until she was lame and facing death. She had no medical recourse living in the jungle other than to call upon God. “He listened to my prayer and I recovered and can walk like others,” she says now. Her restored health saved her life in 1997 when the SPDC burned down her village and she escaped with her family deep into the jungle. They lived in the open, “forced to grow or forage all their food, even during times of drought, flood, or when they are forced to flee from soldiers,” as Jim describes the refugee life. Naw Beh Say Paw continues, “[And] when the rainy season came it was very difficult for us to cook. I saw the villagers and my relatives were sick and we

didn’t have a doctor or even basic medicines to treat them. It very hard for me to see the people die and we couldn’t help them.”

In adversity that would cripple most of us, Naw Beh Say Paw managed to go to school. When a KNU leader told her of a class in basic medical training, she heard her calling: “I decided I will attend medic training to become a health worker and help my Karen people. I am a single and can work freely.” When a friend told her CFI had built a Freedom Hospital near her hometown Baw Peh, she came on board as a medic. “CFI loves us, supports us and helps our people. I feel so happy because my dream became true. If our country can have democracy and we can go back to our own Karen State, I really want to continue to study more and be a doctor so I can come back and help my Karen people especially in the remote areas,” she says.

Six CFI Freedom Hospitals, each staffed by twelve medics, have treated over 120,000 men, women and children. Perhaps that rescue rate is why the SPDC has burned down three of these small, dirt-floored bamboo structures in the last five years. (They were rebuilt elsewhere.) It knows disease and injury will cut the Karen population more effectively than warfare. The Freedom Hospitals do their mighty work without electricity or running water—except what runs from a nearby river—or modern equipment.

The methods of the CFI backpack medics are even more primitive. They bring medicines and equipment to villagers too diseased or maimed to walk. These “guerrillas of healing” trek into the most remote jungles through rain, swift rivers and deep muck. They are sometimes protected by a KNU patrol, but more often they must pick their way alone through mined paths or SPDC-infested regions. Last year, Saw Htun Tin, a medic and father of four, mistakenly walked into an unfamiliar village and was killed by SPDC. “What is making the SPDC so upset is that we change lives,” Jim says.¹⁰ The medics stay for up to four months and provide healthcare and instruction in sanitary practices. The fifty dollars’ worth of supplies they pack cares for one hundred people.

CFI medics also bring Bibles, hymnals and food. “Our mode of operation is



Backpack medics bring medicine to remote villages.

through the indigenous church,” Jim explains, “Wherever we go, we meet with pastors or leaders and ask, ‘What can we do to partner with you? How can we serve you?’ We see them as the experts on their needs. Sometimes it’s just a few hundred bucks and they’ll buy the supplies they need and do the rest. Or maybe they need a walkie-talkie or a Bible, since printing is prohibited there.” Bibles must be smuggled into the country.

Moo Lah Shi, who pastors a small church in Mae La refugee camp, needed Bibles. “It was impossible for me to get a Bible,” he wrote CFI, “[but] after sending a request to you I received Bibles and hymnals. I cannot mention the value of this gift. We pray that God bless your work.” Saw Htoo Htoo Lay, a woman hiding in the jungle, wrote, “We received the Word of God deep inside Burma. Thank you for remembering us in this faraway place.” Emmanuel Sinoy, a student, adds, “Now that we have the Bible, we will read it regularly and share the Word of God to those who have not known Him yet.” CFI also operates a Bible school which equips men like Emmanuel to be pastors, teachers and evangelists. These are not jobs for cowards; they are wanted men in Karen.

Wee Thaw Wah, 74, subsisted in a camp for six years. “I still serve the Lord in a very poor little church which we called Rolling Stone Church. We have 127 members,” he wrote CFI, expressing gratitude for Bibles and hymnals, and added, “We feel like prisoners, but we know that this is the will of our Father in heaven.” Jim Jacobson says of the Karen, “No one is bitter to God. They don’t have a ‘victim’ mentality. Quite the opposite is true.”

CFI is building a vocational boarding school just over the border in Thailand where the officials are friendly (“We are big buyers for local Thai merchants. They all protect us,” Jim says.) The 14,000 square foot school will offer teenage refugees education in English, computers, math and other skills. Jim oversees its establishment and staffing.

CFI supports schools elsewhere as well—such as Thit Kha Yah primary school. Principal and teacher Naw Htoo Laht, 52, is one of six teachers for whom CFI has provided a monthly salary and food rations for two years. CFI bought materials to build the school and supplies for the students. Htoo Laht grew up in Myaw Mya, Burma and received the gospel from “my old grandparents,” he says, “and I have been following Jesus Christ with all my heart ever since.” He worked as a missionary among the Karen people in mountainous Klu Taw Village and witnessed its destruction by Burmese soldiers. He recounts, “They killed many villagers. It was the place where I lived and it is not easy to think of this event so full of despair. I was so upset I decided to bring my family with four sons and one daughter to Thai-Burma boarder to be useful for my Karen people.”

Htoo Laht’s mission continues, he says, “In this place there

are mostly Muslim and Buddhists. There are only five Christian families. We will try our best for this school and try to let these children understand the Creator God and how Jesus loves them and those who believe in Jesus will get salvation. I thank CFI that it looks after this school.” Tamla Gaw, director of a high school in Mae La Refugee Camp, writes that the Bibles provided by CFI are “the most valuable gifts for the youth because the Bible will lead them to the real direction for real life.”

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Microenterprise Brings Hope

CFI believes in self-help and backs up that belief by providing training and small loans for microenterprise. Jim says, “People don’t ask for a handout. They would rather work for something.” Mimi Singh’s first assignment with CFI was to develop a self-help program for the Karen refugees to produce woven handbags. “We bought materials for them and after they finished we bought them at the market price,” says Jim.

If you receive a CFI magazine in the mail you may be surprised to see photos of items for sale interspersed with background stories of Burmese history, accounts of martyrdom and other articles. The crafts are handmade by the Karen people using skills passed down from their ancestors. The quality is excellent and artistic, and the selection extensive. Sales bring income that the Karen cannot find within Burma. According to CFI: “Christian refugees with no other means to provide for their families are happy to have a market for their handcrafts. Your donation for these handcrafts gives dignity and respect to an oppressed brother or sister.” A catalog displays candles, handbags, scarves, pillows, and paper items such as framed pictures, screens, stationery, journals, flowers, parasols and boxes. There are dolls, wooden educational toys, classic games, and kitchen utensils, baskets, quilts, and birdcages. The CFI catalog is a sort of Pier 1 Imports with a religious mission.

Mimi next established a child sponsorship program. She started with twenty children, but now there are three hundred. Many saw their parents killed or lost them to disease. Now they live in the refugee camps. CFI schools and orphanages shelter and nourish these children. Sponsors in the U.S. “adopt” a child and pay \$20 monthly for medical care, schooling and clothing. The sponsor may also correspond with the child.

CFI activities continue to expand. It documents human

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rights abuses and testifies in courts on behalf of victims. In Washington the CFI staff advocates on behalf of persecuted believers. In Sudan, CFI operates an “Underground Railroad,” helping the Christian minority there escape slavery and starvation. Then CFI walks Sudanese Christians through what Jim describes as the long, almost impossibly “convoluted process” of applying to the UN to gain asylum in the U.S., U.K. or Australia. CFI has provided emergency relief in Laos, Indonesia and Pakistan and hopes soon to open its hand to India, Iraq and China. CFI relief consists of food, clothing, blankets, eyeglasses, mine detectors, communication devices, computers, medical equipment, mosquito netting, solar generators and more. CFI collects these from donors for distribution abroad.

The Cato Institute’s Doug Bandow travelled to Burma with CFI officials. “Burma” he wrote, “is an international tragedy...[yet] neither the U.N. nor Western governments will work in Burma against Rangoon’s wishes.”¹¹ Jim Jacobson agrees, “Most NGOs work where they have a government invitation or permission, but governments like the junta in Burma won’t give permission; they want to *stop* us!” That is another reason CFI accepts no government or UN funds. Humanitarian groups that rely on UN or government grants must also comply with their regulations and may serve government interests rather than the people’s. CFI is convinced that private donations of money, manpower and materials—even

small amounts—go much further in relieving the poor than multi-million dollar foreign aid packages waylaid by corrupt officials.

So God’s guerrillas in Burma persist, in small ways and in immeasurably great ways. Jim Jacobson says the Karen “are optimistic. They believe that God will soon answer their prayers and let them return to their land, where they can live in peace.” Until that day, CFI will be there for them.

Notes

1. Sam Dealey, “Burma’s Forgotten War,” *The Asian Wall Street Journal*, Wednesday, March 15, 2000
2. Hans S. Nichols, “Special Report: Smuggling Drugs to Save Lives,” *Insight on the News*, <http://insightmag.com/news/262275.html>
3. *ibid.*
4. Doug Bandow, “Bad Burma Days: Ruling Junta Wreaks Havoc in A Forgotten War,” *Investor’s Business Daily*, Tuesday, July 11, 2000.
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7. Sam Dealey, *op. cit.*
8. Hans Nichols, *op. cit.*
9. Emily Rahe, “Battling Oppression of Christians,” *The Washington Times*, September 13, 2001.
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11. Doug Bandow, “A Forgotten War,” *The American Spectator*, July/August 2000

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