



PORTFOLIO

Burma: The War Goes On

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The Burmese-Kachin conflict has displaced more than 120,000 ethnic Kachin. Makeshift shelters constructed from canvas and bamboo are now home for thousands of internally displaced people who have been pushed ever closer to the Chinese border.



U Thet Oo Son, 33, a jade miner from Talargy village, lives with his family in a camp for internally displaced people. Miners' meager earnings are typically swallowed not only by middlemen but by potent, dirt-cheap heroin, traded in bazaars.

NEAR LAIZA, Burma—At a rebel encampment high in the Kachin Hills, 50 new recruits alternate between knuckle-push ups and jumping jacks, stirring up dust as they move in the searing heat. Some have the deeply tanned, serious faces of laborers; others wear the spiky hair and easy smiles of middle-class kids. When one of the boys lags behind, the drill sergeant shoots him a withering look, as if to say, “Really? That’s the best

you can do?” The kid shrugs and cheerfully struggles on. The exercises feel more like gym class than a military drill. It’s the first week of basic training, and many of the recruits have skipped their school holidays to be here.

A few miles away, another more seasoned group digs a network of trenches into the mountainside. They have the same soft faces, but their expressions are self-consciously hard. The lucky ones carry locally

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manufactured automatic rifles, while the rest must settle for wooden practice guns. Three days shy of graduation, they will soon be on the front lines.

“In all my years, I have never seen so many volunteers like this,” says Major Kyaw Htway, commanding officer at Mawng Seng Yang Training Battalion, a training camp set up by the Kachin Independence Army, or KIA. “We do not have enough guns for the combat exercises.”

For more than 50 years the KIA has been fighting an on-again, off-again war against the Burmese government. The Kachin people are an ethnic



N’Brang Mun Naw discovers his younger brother N’brang Nmun La Tawng’s body, buried by the Burmese soldiers.



N’Brang Mun Naw holds up his dead brother’s identity card. He searched for his brother’s body for weeks before tracking it down in the front lines.



Kachin rebel fighters in the frontlines of Jang Mai, a military outpost controlled by the KIA after the Burmese lost their position in fighting.



A Kachin soldier wearing a woman's hat guards his post on the frontlines near the Burmese border.

and religious minority, devout Christians in Buddhist Burma. The latest conflict erupted in 2011, ending a 17-year ceasefire, about the same time Burma's ruling military junta announced to the world the country would transition to civilian—and putatively democratic—rule.

Today, the mood in Rangoon and Mandalay is cautious optimism, with many Burmese enjoying freedoms unthinkable a short time ago. Here in the far north, however, the story is very different. The war in Kachin State has displaced over 100,000 people to date. The conflict has also inspired overwhelming numbers of young

Kachin to take up the fight for freedom—the price for their country's removal from the ranks of pariah nations.

MASS MILITARIZATION

While the surge of new recruits isn't a new phenomenon, it marks the first time in a generation the Kachin have experienced this kind of mass militarization. Many of the new rebel fighters are villagers and farmers who have been chased from their land by the Burmese army. Arriving regularly in droves at the internally displaced persons camps near the Chinese border, they tell harrowing stories of abuse. Ac-



Many young women have joined the Kachin Independence Army. Once limited to working only as nurses in the military, Kachin women are now being actively recruited by the country's ministry of defense.

cording to Human Rights Watch, Burmese troops have, over the past three years, “shot and killed fleeing civilians, used torture during interrogations, committed rape, and pillaged properties” as part of a campaign to re-assert control over the breakaway region. To be sure, the KIA has also been accused of human rights violations, including the use of child soldiers.

The violence has galvanized the Kachin resistance. A surprising num-

ber of recruits are university students from Myitkyina and other towns on the government-controlled side of Kachin State. Some travel to KIA territory on the pretext of visiting relatives, while others do so illegally, sneaking across the mountain frontier that separates the two sides. KIA cadet Lahpai Sunday enlisted with the rebels after his parents’ farm was expropriated. A university graduate, he cites discrimination and a lack of job prospects as his motivation. “For me, I would rather risk my life than sit in a [refugee] camp, waiting for peace,” he says.

Peace talks have continued sporadically since 2011, with little progress. The flood of new recruits has strengthened the KIA’s resolve to hold out for as long as it takes to achieve political concessions from the Burmese government. The Kachin, like other minorities such as the Shan and the Karen, want a federal system nationwide that guarantees them greater cultural and political autonomy.

Still, there are worries. Mass enlistment has precipitated a demographic crisis of sorts. Able-bodied men are now conspicuously absent from many towns, villages, and displaced persons camps across KIA territory. Je Yang, one of the oldest and largest camps, is an eerie, hard-

scrabble place where women, children, and the elderly have been left mostly to fend for themselves, which they do stoically and without complaint. While the KIA provides its soldiers with room and board, it does not give them a salary they can send home to their families.

“It’s a difficult life for the wives and children,” says Reverend Chinle Zau Awng, pastor of Je Yang’s Baptist congre-



Female KIA soldiers doing laundry in a river separating China and Kachin state. The Kachin rebels depend on Chinese imports for survival.



gation. “When you break up families, there are social problems.” The local churches have set up support groups to combat depression and counsel against divorce and adultery, as well as drug abuse, a problem owing to the availability of cheap opium and heroin in northern Burma, where a substantial crop is harvested each year.

In a society so small—the Kachin number barely a million people spread across both sides of the front lines—militarization is sure to have even deeper, long-term impact. For now, the KIA is subsidizing the war effort by selling off such resources as hardwood and jade to Chinese companies at cut-rate prices. The conflict gives the soldiers a sense of purpose and the illusion of a livelihood, but in turn masks deeper social problems. A large portion of the population is without permanent homes. Broken families are becoming increasingly common, and meaningful economic opportunities are scarce.

“We cannot sell our forests forever, and what happens when there is peace?” asks one KIA staffer who fears being identified. “I don’t think many of the soldiers could tell you what they will do when there is no more fighting.”

In spite of the hardship, support for the KIA remains strong. “Often I wonder how we will survive if my husband does not come back,” says Marip Hkauh San, a resident of Je Yang whose husband joined the rebels two years ago. “I think about this a lot. But this is a sacrifice I must accept. For our people.”

Kachin refugees polish jade, which they sell to China, at the internally displaced camp of Waimaw.



Sumlut La Wang, 52, a Kachin Independence Army soldier, sits on his hospital bed after being tortured by the Burmese military in his village of Hka Len in northern Shan State in Burma. Sumlut La Wang says the Burmese military captured him and beat him unconscious.

LOYALTY AND TRUST

If the Kachin are willing to make sacrifices, it's because the KIA and its political wing, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), have earned their trust. Over the past two decades of ceasefire and conflict, the independence movement has evolved into a reasonably functional de facto government, building what looks and feels like a legitimate, if impoverished, ethnic mini-state. They've established a modest social safety net in the form of a Kachin-language school system, free basic health care, and reliable utilities—which is more than can be said for the Burmese government.

The rebels' management of the displaced persons crisis has strengthened that trust. The Burmese army routinely blocks interna-

tional aid organizations from reaching the camps, so the KIO, along with local religious and civil society groups, has stepped in to provide food and emergency medical services, going so far as to send people in acute need of care to hospitals in China where they can receive higher quality treatment. The KIO is also providing benefits for the widows of soldiers killed in action. The sums are tiny, no more than a few hundred dollars, but the symbolism is appreciated. So while life is difficult in the camps and at the front lines, there is the feeling among refugees and soldiers alike that the KIO is looking out for them.

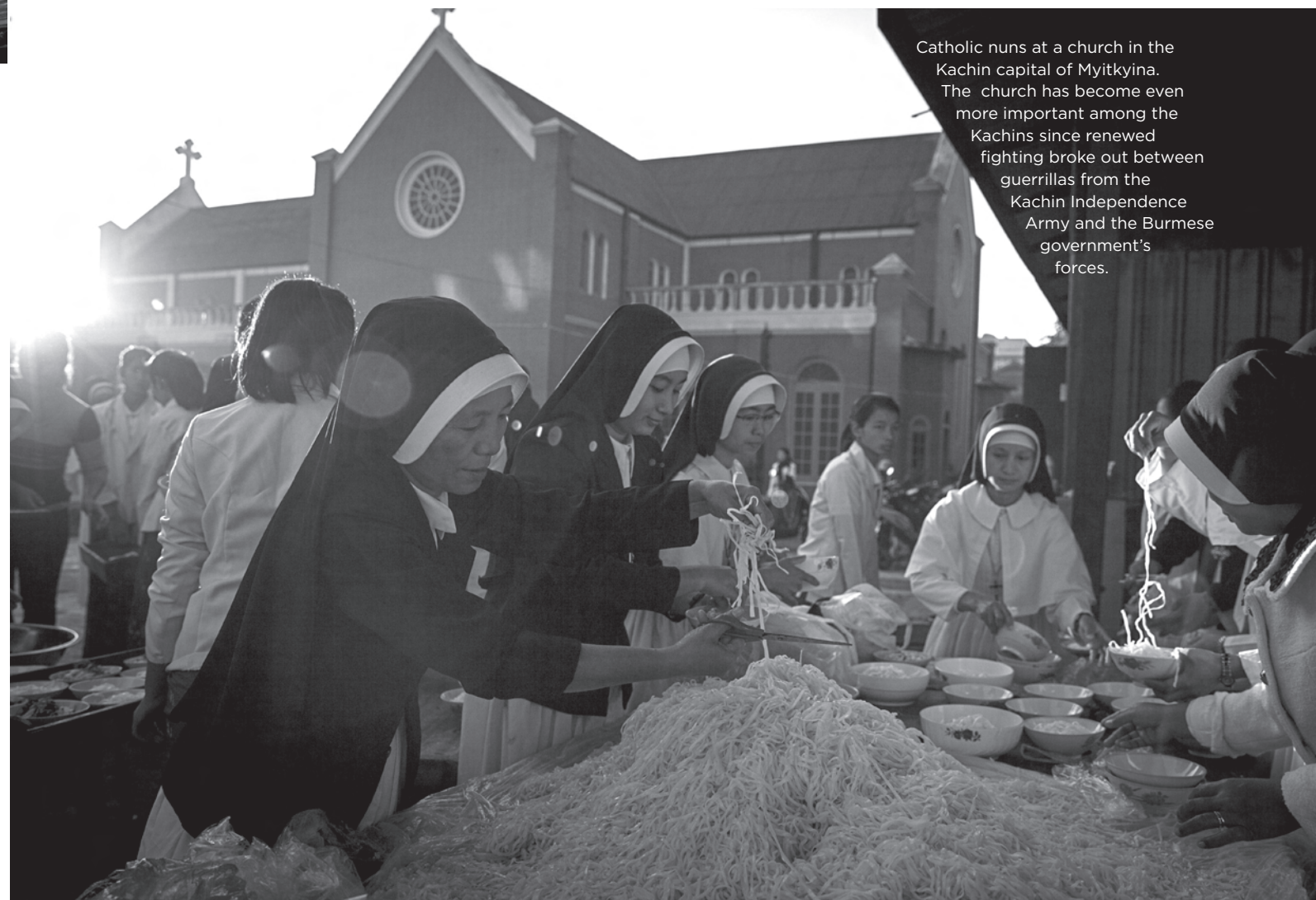
What most rankles people here is that, while the world applauds the Burmese government for making tentative gestures toward democratization, the independence movement is written off as a band of guerrillas, or worse, ignored completely.

"If the world could understand what we have accomplished here, and see how the Burmese still treat our people, they will understand why we must continue to fight," one KIO staffer says.

Increasingly, that fight includes public relations offensives. Recognizing that

the best they can hope for on the battlefield is more of the same, the KIO has begun to reach out to the West to tell its side of the story. In April, a KIO delegation visited Washington to discuss the conflict with representatives from the U.S. State Department and National Security Council—becoming the first Burmese rebel faction to do so since the transition in 2011. Their hope is that even if they can't change the terms of the war, they can change the terms of the eventual peace. ●

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Catholic nuns at a church in the Kachin capital of Myitkyina. The church has become even more important among the Kachins since renewed fighting broke out between guerrillas from the Kachin Independence Army and the Burmese government's forces.



The Irrawaddy River in Kachin state draws on glacial waters from the eastern boundaries of the Himalayas, flowing nutrients into Burma's arid central region.