

BURMA: subdued but NOT conquered

by Naing
as told to Luz Maria Martinez

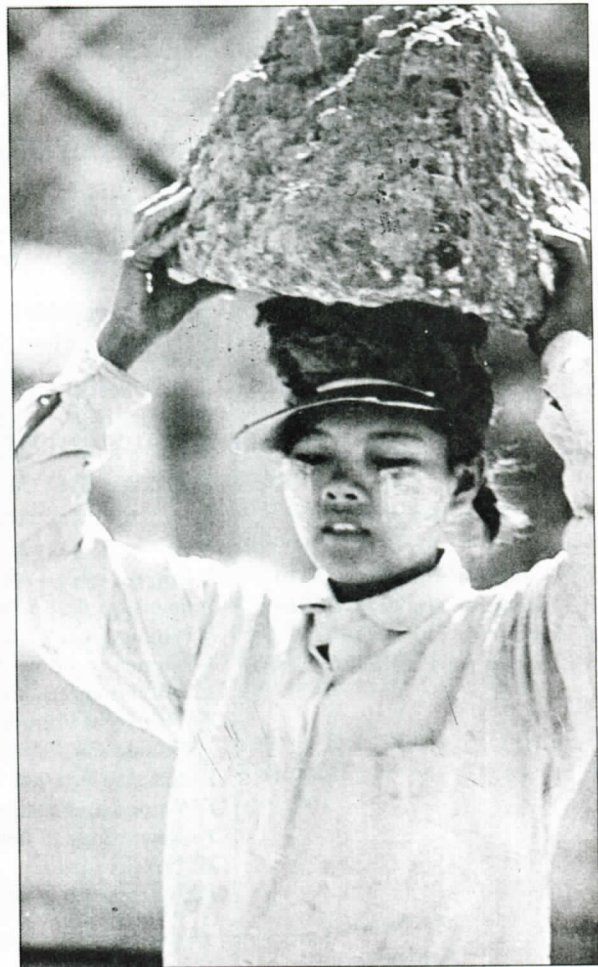
Naing (not her real name) is a young Burmese woman who works as a volunteer in a women's organization on the Thai-Burmese border. She shares her experiences and knowledge of developments in her homeland, now ruled by a military junta calling itself the State Law and Order Council or SLORC, and the oppression and atrocities Burmese women are made to endure.

FEAR AT AN EARLY AGE

"I witnessed the mass killings of students in 1988." Naing was nine years old at the time. She recalls a specific incident when the students were marching, their fists raised. The students looked, acted and sounded defiant, she recalls. It was a sight that thrilled her. She stood and clapped her hands as they passed. She also remembers seeing the soldiers getting ready for the demonstrators. The soldiers had become a permanent fixture as well at universities. Suddenly she heard gun shots and she dropped to the ground. Students were gunned down. Those who were arrested, she would later on learn, were also killed, and the women, tortured, raped and killed.

Rape, Naing says, is the SLORC's favorite weapon against women.

After the incident, the anger at the military has never left Naing. "On one occasion, on the way to the market in a rickshaw with my mother, I saw a soldier and stuck my tongue out at him. Afterwards I was so frightened for what I had done that on the way home, I would



Young women in heavy construction work

Naing

not sit on that side or even look in the direction of where the soldier had stood." Fear for the military starts at a young age.

SWORD AGAINST THE POWERFUL

Aung San Suu Kyi is clearly Naing's hero.

She reads anything by or about Aung San Suu Kyi that she can get her hands on. She sees her as the rightfully elected leader of Burma and hopes for the day when Aung San Suu Kyi will be able to take her rightful place and put an end to the SLORC regime.

Naing is in favor of economic embargoes, which have worked in other countries, as a means of pressuring the SLORC. "I think this is a good idea because it is only the military who benefits from any economic investment or gain that enters the country now. The poor are already poor and the women are the most impoverished. The wealth of the SLORC is made literally off the backs of the poor. With no labor protection laws or recourse for justice, the poor work hard but see very little in return. Embargoes hurt those in power, not the powerless," Naing says.

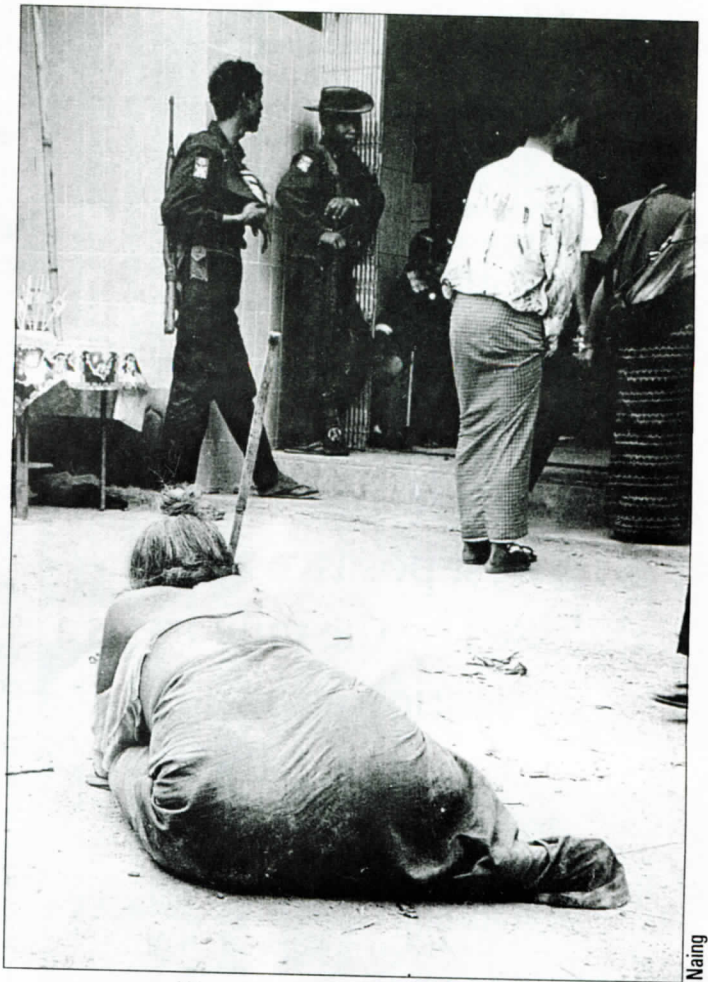
FORCED LABOR

"SLORC has issued a military law that states that all households must contribute to the building of railroad tracks connecting two villages. Each household in the area must contribute physical labor and/or 2,000 kyat (equivalent to US\$20)," Naing says, adding that women are the favored workers for the junta's construction, as they are more easily controlled by their male supervisors and the military.

The women, Naing notes, are forced to carry the cement, bricks and other heavy materials. They are not given any choice of when or where to work, nor are they given any reprieve.

Naing recalls the story of a young widow who went to her local SLORC office to explain that as a widow with several children to support from her earnings as a seamstress, she could not contribute, whether in the form of manual labor or financially, to the construction of the tracks. "The official seized the opportunity and gave her the option to contribute as mandated or to engage in sex with him," she narrates.

Having no other real choice, the widow had to do the latter. The official's demands were frequent, however, and also included that she clean house for him, cook and sew his clothes. She had to tolerate his sexual torture. Unable to tolerate her situation any longer, the widow made the painful choice of leaving her children and running away. She now lives in a refugee camp.



Women used in forced labor

Naing

Forced labor is only one example of how the SLORC oppresses its population and, as the widow's story illustrates, of how women are subjected to even worse forms of political, economic and gender tyranny.

The SLORC's agenda is to promote Burma as a tourist destination, thereby enriching its members further through foreign investments while gaining global legitimacy. Singaporean businessmen, for instance, are courted to invest in the country, and they usually do.

When the projects are completed and clerical and other female-designated jobs are made available, these are usually given to women associated with the military regime.

PROSTITUTION AND TRAFFICKING

Alongside the tourism agenda, some of the military men work as pimps, prostituting women and trafficking women to brothels outside the country. Trafficking of women across the Thai-Burmese border, Naing notes,

is one of the major issues affecting ethnic indigenous women in the region.

Many of the recruiters are Thai businessmen who, with the help of the military, cross into Burma to recruit young women to come to Thailand to work. Many of the women are illiterate and are taken in with promises of work as waitresses. Others who do not speak the dominant language are sold without them understanding a word of the transaction that just took place. The women are then brought into Thailand to work as prostitutes, mainly in Mae Hong Son.

Rumors are that the women who test positive for HIV are killed by the military as a prevention against the spread of AIDS.

There, the women are held hostage by their illegal residency status, too afraid to run away though they may get the chance to, or even to ask for help. The threat of deportation frightens them into submission.

In cases where women have escaped or have been "rescued" by Thai authorities, the women are placed at the Immigration Detention Center (IDC) where they are vulnerable to the Thai men in authority. Reports of women being raped in detention are not uncommon. "Once deported to Burma, they are tested by the SLORC authorities. Rumors are that the women who test positive for HIV are killed by the military as a prevention against the spread of AIDS. I cannot confirm whether this is true or not," says Naing, "but this is one of the rumors we have heard from new refugees in the camps."

What is certain is the NGOs' difficulty in getting any actual information from Thai authorities on Burmese women they have detained or deported. Of course, getting any kind of information as to what happens to the women once deported is impossible.

WOMEN IN REFUGEE CAMPS

Naing's family was one of the more fortunate ones who managed to leave the country on a

tourist visa. They have never returned since. "Just to get the visas," she says, "required bribing the officials, giving them gifts and taking them to dinner." While on school break, Naing works with Empowering Women of Burma, a voluntary women's NGO based in Bangkok.

The organization seeks out donors and provides services to women and children living in refugee camps on the border.

The women in the camps are provided basic education and trained in indigenous handicrafts. Usually the men sell the handicrafts outside the camp, on the streets to tourists or on consignment to specialty shops. This way, the refugee families are able to earn some money.

When possible, Naing's group gives cash donations to the women. "We hand them money without the knowledge of their husbands or other males in the family. We know that the women will put this money to good use for the entire family," says Naing.

The women in the camps and those in Burma help each other in various ways. "We hear from the newly arrived women that those in Burma are banding together and setting up welfare centers on their own. In these centers, they say, the women pool whatever money they have for a rotating loan system. They also take in babies that are being abandoned."

"We need help" Naing stresses. "The refugee camps are growing and are under constant threat of removal by Thai authorities. We welcome and appreciate all solidarity, participation and support through donation in cash or kind."

As for herself, Naing knows exactly what she should do—prepare herself for that day when Burma will be free, when Aung San Suu Kyi will be the country's leader and when she and the thousand other Burmese can return once again to their own country. She plans to return to school and study medicine. "With a proper education I will be ready. My country will need people who can help. When that time comes I will be there." ☺

*One of the organizations working tirelessly for women in Burma is the Empowering Women of Burma. They can be contacted at
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