

STORIES OF OTHERS

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This paper I have developed from my thesis. The title of this paper came to me after the incident on the 25th of October at Tak Bai in Narathiwat province, Southern of Thailand. When I saw a video about the incident I began to wonder why the military and the police killed and mistreated the protestors on the 25th. I believe that the military and police saw those protesters as the "other," so they do not feel that they have to treat these people well. If they thought of these people as their relatives they would have responded to them differently. Max Ediger, a coordinator at Center for Justpeace in Asia has said whatever the reason, the act of killing must surely first require the dehumanization of the "other." If the other is my friend, my sister, my relative, then I cannot easily see them as a worthless object, or pull a trigger just because it is my duty. Dehumanizing the other person is to remove them from my definition of humanity or to conclude that they are not a part of God's great creation.

The inspiration for my thesis research came from my 10 years experience with Burma Issues, a human rights and education organization based in Thailand. I have observed that most reports on Burma tend to focus on the conflict at the national level between the Burmese military and the ethnic groups, which has been going on for many decades. The most obvious and common solution to the conflict in Burma is the use of violence. Many people there are already used to dealing with conflict by violence. However, during my work at Burma Issues I also heard many positive stories from villagers in different places in Burma about the peoples' tactics to overcome oppression. Unfortunately these tactics and the people who practice them are rarely recognized.

As I only found information about Burma's conflict at the national level I often wondered what kind of conflict exists at the community level, what the ethnic people in Burma face and how they deal with the conflict in their communities. Therefore, I started this project on conflict in the refugee communities of Karen people from Tenasserim Division of Burma. These people had to abandon their land in Burma because of military operations and the activities of transnational corporations.

I started my field research in Tham Hin Refugee camp in Suan Phueng, Rachaburi province in Western Thailand in January 2004. I spent 2 months in the camp conducting interviews. I had been in this camp several times in my work with Burma Issues and to help the Thai academics in their research.

There are several reasons why I selected this camp. First, the policies of the Thai government in managing this camp have been extremely strict ever since people first arrived in 1997. Second, the people there have faced increased pressure from authorities over the last few years. Third, these people have been forced to leave their land because of development projects inside Burma, including a gas pipeline, deep seaport, highway and railway, all projects where foreign companies cooperate with the Burmese military.

Tenasserim division became an economic focus for the Burmese military government and foreign companies after 1988, when Burma changed to an open market economy. After gas pipeline

construction began in 1991, villages in the region of the pipeline were relocated to make way for the pipeline project and to make the area secure. Due to the pipeline and other infrastructure projects in the area, the Burmese Army strength in the district built up steadily from four battalions in mid-1991 to 29 by 1997. The result of the military operations in this division has been an increase in human rights violation including forced displacement, and the mass exodus of displaced people. Many of the villagers in Tenasserim division fled to Thailand after the military offensive in 1997. From that time until the present, they have sought refuge on Thai soil.

These people have faced new conditions in their lives since they crossed the border and moved to the refugee camps. They have different lifestyles in terms of economy, culture, education, etc., compared with their original homes. They must also deal with severe limitations in the camp. Thai policies regulating the Burmese refugee camps place strong restrictions on house building and freedom of movement. Most of the people I spoke with raised the issue of space limitations in their conversations. Some people said they wanted a small piece of land to plant vegetables and flowers around their house, but they could not do it. These limitations have caused tension and stress for people in the camp, which often translate into interpersonal and social conflict.

The different living conditions in the camp cause acute stress and alienation among people who have been traumatized by violence, uprooted from their homes, separated from their families and denied access to adequate social services and gainful employment. All of these factors shape the interpersonal conflicts in Tham Hin camp. Thai policies and social interactions in the camp between the Thai authorities and the refugees have intensified the conflicts that exist in the camp.

For example, in the past the Karen people had strong morals but in the camp they have already lost this. One English teacher said that young people in the camp could not maintain their morals any more in this new environment, which has changed people's lifestyles. The young people who have gone to work on fishing boats in Thailand have learned new behavior from Thai people. They have been to brothels and also imitate the negative behavior they see on television. Some of the young men have contracted HIV while working on the fishing boats. From life experiences and from movies, new behavior is learned and adopted by these young men who, when they come back to the camp to visit, carry with them their new practices and experience which they, of course, share with their colleagues.

One high school student told me about the Thai Volunteer Militia (OrSor) who punished several people in the camp by ordering them walk around the camp without clothes and while shouting that they will not make such mistakes in the future. This humiliated them. The Camp Committee members also said they did not like the fact that the Thai militia punished them in a way that is humiliating in Karen culture. But people in the camp feel they cannot do anything with the militia. Some of them have said that people in the camp will never forget for this event. They have lost their dignity, value, culture and customs. Children who were born in the camp do not have the skills for farming, weaving, raising animals and so on. One parent said their children do not know elephants. When children saw a buffalo they thought it was an elephant. These children will face difficulty when they return to their villages in the future.

I think that many young people growing up in the camp with limited possibilities for dealing with problems may choose to deal with problems in a negative way. Many men turn to alcohol when they do not see a solution for this problem. Domestic violence has been increasing in the camp. The story about the boy who says he wants to kill his mother when he grows up is one example of this problem. I was told this story by a Burmese Muslim. His mother left him and his siblings in the camp after his father went to work in Thailand. She found a new husband in the camp and moved with him to live outside the camp. When his father came back he got angry with his wife

but he could not do anything because she was already gone, so he turned his anger towards his children. He told his children that he wanted to kill them, but an elder from nearby came to intervene. He calmed down after he listened the instructions from the older man, but his elder son now says when he grows up he will kill his mother and his stepfather. He is just ten years old.

The Karen in the camps often talked about life in the refugee camps in a similar way to Meas Nee, a former Cambodia refugee in Thailand: "Eat if you are fed, stop if you are told to stop, move if you are told to move, do not move out one small allocated area". For the refugees, this life also has a high price: loss of dignity, of identity, of value and power. People do not know what to do for their future and their children's future, because they have to struggle day by day to survive in the camp. The Karen people struggle with boredom. They used to be in places that had a good environment: fresh air, water and food, and they had jobs and could move around their villages. They explained the situation before the SPDC arrived in their villages was very peaceful and they did not have to worry about their basic needs. Their life styles were so simple that they were self-reliant. They could remain independent in their villages.

The interpersonal and social conflicts that occur in the camp, like quarrels over animal raising, humiliation, arranged marriages to Thai officials against the daughter's will, conflicts over money, land use, adultery, space constraints, etc. might seem small-scale, but if one looks at them deeply and carefully, these conflicts are deep rooted among the refugees. It is as if the refugees are stepping over landmines, waiting for the explosion that will occur any day.

The civil war and life in tightly controlled camps affects people psychologically, especially children and youth. Children and youth who are constantly looked down upon, or face humiliation from soldiers and camp guards have developed feelings of inferiority which result in depression or even anger and hatred. This will affect the way they grow up and how they live their lives. These psychological problems will also determine how they deal with conflicts in the future. It makes violent solutions to conflicts more acceptable to them as they grow up surrounded with so much humiliation and violence.

Even though most of the people do not yet resort to violence, the situation has the potential to become more violent in the future as long as people do not have appropriate tools to use in their community, and also if conflict at the community level is not addressed.

When I was in the Tham Hin refugee camp during my field study people there often asked me to help them with the issues that concerned them. I explained that I was in the camp as a student who wanted to learn about their stories. Though I did not think that I could help them to deal with their problems, I told them that my paper could be a voice for them, and that it will be helpful for outsiders to understand more about their situation. I also wish that the stories from the people in the camp that I have tell you will inspire some of you to learn more. Max Ediger says, "When somebody has lost everything - family, home, land, worldly possessions, faith, and identity, the only thing left that nobody can take away is a story. And the telling of these stories can be a healing experience for people. The act of telling the story is an act of peacemaking. Peacemakers are the recipients and the tellers these stories. Yet to receive a story is not the end. There is a call to act on the story".

I think it is important for researchers to learn how others think and feel. As Max Ediger says, "when we truly learn to listen to others, especially those most marginalized, exploited, angry and frustrated, we can begin to know how to build new economic, political and social systems that respect justice, freedom and human rights".

If I look back to the situation of the ethnic people in Burma and the relationship between the Thai authorities and the refugees in the camps, I see people who are often viewed as "others," as "worthless objects" in the view of majority people or the state because of differences in culture, languages, beliefs, customs and so on. According to my observation of the situation in Burma, the Burmese military see the ethnic people in their country as worthless objects and this may be why human rights violations there are not taken seriously. I think this quotation is a good example of how "the other" thinks and feels in response:

"We feel that the Burmese Army treats us as their enemy...May be this is because we are Karen, one of the ethnic nationalities in this country which is different from the Burmans." (by Saw Paw Mai from Pa Saw Oot village, Tenessarim division)