

BURMA

THE UPRISING!



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BURMA - THE UPRISING

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INTRODUCTION

Though forebodes were there from how I ended 'Oh Burma' I could not have foreseen the Uprising was coming soon., Omens abound but due to the fears expressed it did not feel a resurrection was at hand. But when it happened I was in Thailand, 1988, and so quite close to the Burmese border. I decided to go to the Karen areas, a staunch people who had been fighting the unwilling Burmese leaders for their right to self determination. And, they were not alone in that desire: from the Kachin and Nagas in the North, the Wa and Shan in the East, the Karenni, Padaung and Mon in the South, the Arakanese and Chin in the West, many more large tribes had their aspirations, were at par with the Karen. In fact during those days most peoples were members of the National Democratic Front, an organization of indigenous who had that one thing in common: the right to self determination which was not granted to them by the Central uprising Burmese Governments. And, now that the Uprising had come from within the Burmese People especially the Karen, who were projected as barbarians by the same Central Government, took in all those who had to run for their lives after the Uprising had been stamped up by the ruthless military apparatus of the Military Junta, then still headed by the from 1962 after a coup, utterly despised military dictator Ne Win.

The sense of tension among the Burmese people I had felt then, see Oh Burma, came to an apotheosis when the built up storm in the teacups of the teahouses of Rangoon unleashed torrential rain which led to the insurrection of 1988. And it had begun with the students who had been building up tension for months till the crackdown of the Burmese soldiers, ordered by their generals. These soldiers had openly killed some of them which in contrast to what the military junta expected, had opened the box Pandora's which led to the popular uprising of 1988. Thousands, nay hundreds of thousands, then millions took to the streets to protest against the stifling rule of the military. They protested against this iron grip and due to the

students paving the way a tidal wave of angry people sensed that the time to remove this brutal regime from power had come. This was the time for finally the opportunity had risen as it was forced by the students who had the nerve to stand up and when some had been brutally killed this had been the last drop and the for many years cropped up feelings came thundering down like an avalanche which could not be stopped; the outrage had to be vented. out like And now, after hundreds of people had been publicly killed and many more, thousands, secretly but equally brutally and the world looked on without intervening, I went back to Manerplaw on the Moey River, close to Thailand, in fact just across that lovely river which flowed north to empty into the mighty Salween. I was there with a friend an on invitation because we were due to follow up on what we had done before, reporting on the Karen and the predicaments they were in and as a result had to endure from the attacks of the Burmese Armed Forces. Little did we know then that so many students and forced carriers, civilians, for that Burmese Army had taken refuge there. We had come from Chang Mai where we had teamed up with the vice president of the KNU, the Karen National Union and travelled with him and his entourage to a village along the Salween where we boarded a boat to the camp. But, before we reached that riverine village we passed through a logging camp and stopped for the Vice President had something to tell:

“You know, with the floods in the south of Thailand it is likely that there will be a logging ban soon. And, Thai traders already have been active, or better said, have been active for some time in anticipation of that forthcoming ban. So, all these teak logs you see here come from Burma, this is Burmese teak and it has been transported by us. This is one of the ways of financing the war against them,” he explained before we rode off again. He also disclosed that something rather different was in store for me as he said:

“After the bloody crack down on them and the civilians at large thousands of Burmese students fled Rangoon and other towns to

regroup, reorganize and to carry on their struggle against that brutal regime. You will be flabbergasted,” he predicted, “the students are not the only ones who took refuge in our camp; many leaders of the Democratic Alliance of Burma, DAB, were able to reach Manerplaw in the nick of time too and are now busily planning future steps.”

Aung San Sy Kyi, their supreme leader had been taken into custody and off and on would be kept under house arrest the future would learn. She, later to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, until now had not been able to be free from persecution, despite her efforts to show the world the importance of what was happening to her people. Looking back from the year 2007 when again, but now headed by the thousands of monks setting the example for all commoners to follow in their footsteps, the people took to the streets again only to meet with the same fate namely oppression and killing, the story of a people under the yoke of some powerful but brutal masters unfolds while this time with a glimmer of hope that the international community does not abandon them.

“That’s true! This is the truth and nothing but. Yet, there is nothing much we can do now but for the SLORC, the Military Junta to organize a general election. And, of course, the United Nations should initiate and support that move. These are testing times and Ne Win will be busy to regain control,” he said heaving his arms in despair. We met in Manerplaw just after the uprising of 1988 when Burma burned and many people lost their lives. But he, a man of the Democratic Alliance of Burma whose name cannot be revealed for fear of severe reprisals to him and more so to his family, had to remain unknown. Manerplaw was then the headquarters of the Karen National Union and the Karen Army and it was there that thousands of students and DAB members had fled to. Because after fleeing the relentless persecution of the Burmese Army the Karen, headed by general Bo Mya, had taken them in and now from here the press could meet those fortunate men and women who had been able to escape from the wrath of

the junta. Though known throughout the world now and making headlines while the uprising was in progress here in Manerplaw, a stone throw from Thailand on the other side of the Moey River, a few deep digging journalists had come. The resurrection itself had been news; the aftermath seemed to have only caught the interest of those who wanted to know about of the Burmese people, their motivation and what the Burmese generals did to them. The stories these Burmese students and DAB members told in an offhand manner were difficult to believe, more so when the Karen showed us carriers of the soldiers forcibly recruited by the Burmese Army and left for dead when no longer of use, the atrocities unleashed the terrorism of the state perpetrated on its own people were real, very real. So when he, the DAB man, told me about these atrocities and I realized what actually had happened and was happening, defied belief. He referred me to the students the runaway carriers and even to defected Burmese soldiers themselves who had been given refuge in Manerplaw too.

Years later and revisiting Burma, renamed Myanmar officially by the same junta, for the occasion of the Naga Festival held in the Sagaing Division of the Northwest of the country, I prepared for the organized touristic tour in Rangoon, also renamed and now called Yangon, Not knowing but sensing another resurrection was at hand, early morning I walked through the old city where all looked normal but felt the opposite. Not so far from the Motherland Hotel I wandered into a big market, one for ordinary people. While shooting pictures I noticed a long line of monks on the road collecting alms. It was a long line of young monks, aged between ten and twenty, who were headed by a few adults. They slowly walked through the market which upon following and picturing them went to the front of the scruffy market where they had their magnificent temple and Wat situated. When they had finished collecting the abbot as I later learned invited me to come and join them as he said in English:

“I see you picturing us. Would you like to come into our Wat

and talk?"

"It would be my pleasure," I reacted pleased with his hospitality. So, I went after him and the long row of young monks who as he told me were really abandoned children he had taken in; children who had nothing to go on and he was training to become good and sensible people. This was quite in contrast to what I had experienced in the Northwest of Burma, Burmese Nagaland where I was at first told and later had confirmed by monks themselves there that Buddhism was to be spread among the Nagas and if not willingly accepted then the monks had to resort to force to submit the indigenous people. To actually feel the motivation of the Burmese people to resurrect against the military junta knowing well and good that they put their lives on the line first. The trip to Nagaland however had some of the junta members showing themselves off to the tourists who in majority had come for the adventure, the adventure to come face to face with the infamous Naga headhunters.

CHAPTER ONE

Naga Festival in Myanmar with unexpected twists and turns

Sealed off from the outside world Nagaland Myanmar together with a greater portion of land in India is the homeland of the Nagas many call Nagalim so as to not to confuse it with Nagaland State in India. Officially the authorities tell that this measure was taken and enforced because Nagaland is in turmoil and is consequently heavily militarized. So to prevent visitors from trouble beyond comprehension, no one is allowed to enter the Naga Hills. An exception to this measure comes once a year when the Naga harvest Festival is held. For tourists and travelers officially organized by a Myanmarese travel agency, Diamond, this year some 50 people of all kinds of western background came together at Yangon and Mandalay airports to begin their journey to Lahe, the venue of the festival. The flight via Mandalay to Khamti did not take very long, some three hours altogether, but the ride to Lahe was of different caliber. After arriving in Khamti, a Naga town on the Chindwin River, smooth traveling was left behind. The signs already apparent had cast their shadows ahead when we started from Yangon where ominous disorganization reached a level beyond belief in the run up to transporting eager visitors to Lahe. Since many of these visitors had their own personal guides with them, to enable them to communicate between the staff of the agency only not with the Nagas for these guides do not speak any Naga language either, all others were kept in the dark about timing and preparations for the arduous trip. This alone, in retrospect, threw a shadow on genuine attention for Naga cultures in Myanmar. Packed in worn out pickup trucks, the journey to Lahe went over narrow roads and over six ridges. When just after sunset the destination was reached the reception, though erratic in relation to where to sleep, was magnificent because of the restaurant and bamboo made makeshift hotel accommodation. Nothing less than a affine compliment should be extended to the organization for bamboo

single rooms, probably built especially for the occasion, and the de luxe meals that were served. Pampering visitors in the Naga environment may be worth a compliment, informing them about the program left much to be desired.

Engines roared as the pickup trucks, eight people on board, moved over the narrow road through the Naga Hills of Burma/Myanmar. Because to me they really were more like majestic mountains I pondered about the British perception that during their colonial days reduced them to mere 'hills'. On the way to Lahe for the yearly Naga Harvest Festival, a gathering of several Naga tribes to celebrate while taking the opportunity to socialize amongst each other, these roaring engines kept on for over six hours. Situated in the extreme northwest of Myanmar Lahe is a Naga village and this year's venue for the festival. But to get there the trip was arduous one. Though normally off limits to foreign visitors once a year the military junta, only for the festival, the Military allows designated travel agents to book the trip to these remote Naga Hills. Still In Yangon, the capital of Myanmar, I tried to get information on the program of this trip, but not even the travel agency, a subsidiary, could come up with details.

Though it had a colorful brochure aimed at wetting one's appetite. Diamond Travels, owned or controlled by members of the Government, assigned to organize the trip for over fifty foreigners could not come up with details like which tribes would participate and what they were going to do; likewise no info on the cultural significance of what they were going to at the gathering. So, when I started out early morning to catch the flight to Khamti on the Chindwin River, I was flabbergasted by the disarray in organization to begin with. Checking in at five o'clock in the morning for the flight at six proved to be impossible for there were no representatives of Diamond Agency present. When half an hour later frantic fellow passengers besieged the at first lone Diamond Travel representative, I thought we were in for troubled start. Things worked out wonderfully well though once the check in

personnel were properly informed and miraculously the flight took off only with a delay of at most half an hour. In Mandalay the rest of the passengers joined and the brief stop after the plane touched down in Khamti we were whisked off to the river by ordinary pick-ups. Ferries, a separate one for the luggage alone, put us across where ten pick-ups were waiting for us to begin the journey.

On the road

“This is so fascinating, the nature around here, the beautiful mountains, and the people as they are living here a secluded life. It is all very exciting,” a elderly lady exclaimed as I asked her what she knew about the Naga Culture. An American photographer and a couple of Canadians together with an older lady from New Zealand listened while we spoke trying to beat the sound of the roaring engine.

“They are a wonderful people who know how to live in these mountains. Very little is known about them and I am happy I have the chance to come along on this trip. It is just a pity that it costs so much. I am sure the Government of Myanmar only organizes this to get some foreign exchange, don’t you think so?” she asked. The price for the trip was hefty indeed \$1200.- for five days, but everything included so it was hard to actually think how the organization could make any profit on this. The trip alone by pick up to Lahe must have been costly. But when I asked her if she knew the area was heavily militarized, she with the others joining in said:

“I do know of course that Myanmar had a military Government which undoubtedly can stay in power only with force. I have spoken with a few people in Mandalay and they were friendly but very reluctant if not scared to talk about any matter concerning the country. They told me talking is dangerous, anything can happen and this means not just getting arrested for no reason, but tortured. I found it hard to believe for everything looked so peaceful, not a soldier to be seen. Here on the road I see more than in Mandalay itself. So, yes why should they be here? I don’t think the Nagas are a threat to the Government of Myanmar. Don’t you agree,”