

Deeper Change in Burma: Working Towards Inclusive Democracy



*MAY 2014: BURMAS ROHINGYAS. UNITED TO BRU GENOCIDE. CREATIVE COMMONS. SOURCE: ILLUSTRATION BY RZB6GR

Two Rohingya boys walking in an Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camp in Burma.

Countering Dehumanization and Hate

I was with my 22-year-old sister-in-law in our house. We ran outside. People were running everywhere. My sister-in-law was shot in the stomach. There were many people killed – up to 100 killed, men and women. I saw small children being thrown into the burning houses. Our neighbour's children, toddlers, were thrown into the fire. I was shot too at that time.

— 17-YEAR OLD ROHINGYA GIRL, INTERVIEW #12 IN WITNESS TO HORROR¹

Since October 2016, Burma's military has unleashed a new wave of violence against Muslim Rohingya civilians in the northwest. Burning villages, massacres, rape, and looting have driven at least 70,000 Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh. Burma's government, led by Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, denies any military wrongdoing, and claims that Rohingyas are burning their own homes in the hope of getting new ones built by international relief agencies. This same government blocks access to Rohingyas by humanitarian

agencies, journalists, and independent international investigators, and has refused to cooperate with a fact-finding mission appointed by the UN Human Rights Council.

For decades, Burma's military has systematically stripped Rohingyas of their rights and stoked tensions between neighbouring Arakanese Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. Since 2012, repeated waves of violence have driven a conservatively estimated 168,000 Rohingyas from Burma, and forced over 140,000 into squalid concentration **PAGE 4 ▶**

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¹ *Witness to Horror*, Kaladan Press Network, 2017, available on Kaladan's site: <https://goo.gl/UAYuJK>

Return is Never That Simple

“The camp is very crowded, and people are feeling a lot of uncertainty.” The elected leader of Mae La, the largest refugee camp in Thailand, was explaining the sharp increase in suicides among its residents. Their anxiety about the future couldn’t be more evident.

Unlike other refugee camps worldwide, Mae La and other camps in Thailand manage their own operations, with supplies and support from Inter Pares’ long-term counterpart The Border Consortium (TBC). Many residents have been here for over 20 years. Most of these people, along with the estimated two million others that have sought refuge in Thailand, fled the scorched-earth tactics and human rights violations of Burma’s military.

Thailand tolerates the camps’ presence, but they face new pressures from an international community that is eager to support Burma’s democratic transition and tired of supporting refugees. One by one, international NGOs providing services in camps are withdrawing, and foreign governments are reducing or eliminating funding – citing refugee emergencies elsewhere, or a preference to support

democratization in central Burma. How all of the residents’ food and shelter needs will be met for next year remains unclear.

TBC believes that by pulling out, NGOs and donor governments are effectively quitting a 30-year marathon just as it enters what could be its final leg. TBC has been focusing its efforts on programs that help refugees to improve their farming, entrepreneurial, and

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administrative management skills in ways that will serve them after the camps close. TBC also facilitates refugees participating in visits to potential repatriation sites, so that they can make more informed decisions about their future.

The challenges to return are daunting. Burma’s government has not made support

A New Vision for Land in Burma



Sai Khur Hseng,
General Secretary of
the Ethnic Community
Development Forum.

Around the world, land is central to many social justice struggles. It matters who controls it, how it’s developed and used, and who benefits (or suffers) from how it’s used.

Burma is no different. Over six decades of conflict, the Burma Army has taken advantage of armed conflict to displace rural ethnic people from their territory. Today, despite celebrated moves towards democracy, Burma’s military still mostly controls the country’s administration, and uses its power to confiscate huge amounts of land for agribusiness and for megaprojects like dams and mines.

Ethnic civil society organizations have a different vision for land use in Burma: one that honours customary

for repatriation a priority, and has stated that it cannot yet support a large-scale return. Refugees point to military forces still occupying their home areas – the same military that they fled. Instead of withdrawing, the military has taken advantage of recent ceasefires to strengthen its presence in contested areas where most camp refugees are from. Fighting flares up sporadically, especially around sites that the military has grabbed for large dams and other state-sanctioned development projects. There are unmapped landmines laid by all sides of the conflict. A large-scale return in safety and dignity requires extensive preparation – which is why preparation has been the major focus of refugee efforts and TBC’s work for the past several years.

Despite the challenges, Inter Pares is committed to supporting the refugees’ ongoing efforts to build safe futures for their families. We will accompany them in this final leg of the marathon, and will continue to encourage other donors to do the same. Refugees have been capable managers of their communities in exile, and they are the best-placed to decide what should come next. ☺



SAMANTHA MCGAVIN



SAMANTHA MCGAVIN

Mae La camp, the largest refugee camp in Thailand.

management systems that enable participatory, grassroots control. The Ethnic Community Development Forum (ECDF), an Inter Pares counterpart that unites several community development organizations, spent two years studying customary land management practices in ethnic communities. Such practices honour people’s connections to their land, protect the environment, and create sustainable livelihoods.

ECDF’s General Secretary, Sai Khur Hseng, was able to share this learning this past June, when Inter Pares sponsored his participation in Equitas’ International Human Rights Training Program (IH RTP) in Montreal. It was a rich opportunity for Sai Khur Hseng to meet with

activists from around the world, sharing strategies and tools for resistance, but also dreams for more just futures.

ECDF has developed concrete proposals for how customary land management practices could be supported and integrated into a future devolved national land system. Such a system requires a federal, truly democratic and inclusive government – a dream that we and all our Burma counterparts share, and work towards each day. ☺

To watch a video interview with Sai Khur Hseng:
www.interpares.ca/saikhurhseng

Countering Dehumanization and Hate

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camps within the country. This violence has been characterized as crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, and even genocide.

The military and the state have gained popular support by characterizing Rohingyas as unwanted foreigners and a security threat. Powerful Buddhist monks have disseminated hate speech with very few impediments. The rhetoric of dehumanization on social media has been prolific.

The report *Witness to Horror* documents the voices of Rohingya women displaced by the latest violence. Published by Kaladan Press Network, an independent Rohingya news agency and long-time Inter Pares counterpart, the women's accounts are shattering. Documenting lived experiences is a critical component to confronting this situation, as is building solidarity within Burma. In 2003, with support from Inter Pares, Kaladan and other ethnic news agencies formed Burma News International to encourage collaboration between journalists reporting on local news. Now including eleven media groups, it is Burma's only coalition to include both Rohingya and Arakanese members.

Another Inter Pares counterpart, whose name is withheld for their security, works to bring Rohingya and Arakanese youth together for leadership courses that require collaboration. This builds understanding and empathy to counter dehumanization and hate. For the same reason, Inter Pares supported a trip by members of Burma's civil society to meet with Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

For Inter Pares, it is also important that we share what we hear in Burma with Canadians to raise awareness and inform Canadian foreign policy. In 2016 we testified before the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, who subsequently published



RENTYOUNG



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANJALI BACHH, © 2017. EUI/IECHO/PIERRE PRAMASHI, CREATIVE COMMONS. SOURCE: IICJ.AK/PP/SP/ONIC

Top: The award-winning play *I Am Rohingya* features Rohingya refugee youth living in Canada.

Bottom: Rohingya families that have fled to Bangladesh.

a report² with strong recommendations for Canadian government action to promote Rohingya rights.

In mid-2017, we started supporting an initiative in Ontario. *I Am Rohingya* is a play created by Rohingya youth whose families resettled to Canada. One of its producers, Innerspeak Media, is creating a documentary to share the message with a broader audience. Bringing together human rights, refugee experiences, and international action, this project exemplifies the interconnections between us all. Throughout our Burma programming, we are seeking opportunities to build connections like these and focus on our shared humanity. 

Our Burma program is undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through Global Affairs Canada.

² *Sentenced to a Slow Demise: The plight of Myanmar's Rohingya minority*, 2016: <https://goo.gl/ex2ygK>

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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