

Burma's Forgotten Wars



Women relaxing with their children at Mai Na IDP camp in Kachin State, Burma.

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“People are trapped in the jungle and can’t go home to their villages.” It is April 2018, and Steven and I are talking in a hot wooden house in Kachin State, northern Burma. Steven is the Secretary General of the Kachin Development Networking Group (KDNG), an amazing long-term Inter Pares partner that is dedicated to sustainable development and environmental protection. Steven and his colleagues are telling me about the recent Burma Army bombing of Tanai township in western Kachin State, where the Burma Army launched fresh offensives this year. The army is blocking roads, preventing aid from reaching people and villagers from escaping. Tanai has lucrative amber mines – and the Burma Army is trying to gain control over them.

As we sit and share updates over tea, Steven and his colleagues recount one story after another about natural resource megaprojects that displace communities from their homes and bring greater military presence. I’ve heard so many similar accounts of such displacement in Burma over my 15 years at Inter Pares. It is clear: Burma’s government sees land as a resource to control and plunder, instead of as an integral part of the lives and cultures of communities who have long been its stewards, and to whom government must be accountable.

I spent the next two days visiting with people living in internally displaced persons’ (IDP) camps outside of Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State. The camps are well-organized with rows of thatched huts, and [PAGE 2 ▶](#)

managed by a variety of elected committees. But they're crowded, with five to ten family members living in a single 11'x18' room. Food rations are limited, and residents must spend hours collecting firewood from further and further away.

In one camp, Janmai, I am really struck by how widespread the conflict is, and how systematic it feels. The residents come from 17 different communities across the state. Some had fled when they heard the Burma Army was approaching. Others were less fortunate, and when the army arrived, soldiers killed villagers or forced them into dangerous hard labour. Some people made the terrifying journey across the armed conflict's front line to reach camps like Janmai, which have some assistance. But so many others are stuck behind the front line, unable to access international assistance, as Burma's government has blocked humanitarian aid from reaching many IDP camps.

The situation only became worse after Aung San Suu Kyi came to power in 2015, not better. Her spokesperson insists that IDPs on the "wrong side" of the front line have to cross over in order to get aid – in direct contravention of international law. Barely any global attention is paid to the IDPs' desperate plight, or to the government's role in its creation.

Human rights violations by the Burma Army, including rape, are all too common in the seven years since the army broke its ceasefire with the Kachins. The Kachin Women's Association of Thailand (KWAT), another one of our partners, estimates that over 120,000 people have been displaced, and thousands killed since the ceasefire ended. KWAT, along with KDNG and others, is calling on the United Nations to refer Burma to the International Criminal Court for war crimes in Kachin State.


A few days later I am in Chiang Mai, Thailand, catching up with Charm Tong, an old friend of Inter Pares. We discuss the Burma Army's ongoing attacks on civilians in the war it's waging against ethnic armed groups in Shan State. She tells me about her work with the newly formed Shan State Refugee Committee (SSRC), a group led by

members of IDP camps on the Shan-Thai border that is advocating for recognition and assistance to the camps. While it receives modest support from Inter Pares, SSRC is urgently seeking significant funds for food and medical services for its residents who simply cannot return home.

There are similar concerns when I visit our partners in Malaysia, who are committees of ethnic refugees from Burma that offer services and advocacy for their community members. Despite precarious and dangerous conditions in Malaysia, where refugees are unrecognized and are often exploited and deported, the news from back home in Burma leaves people convinced that it is still not yet safe to return.

Through my conversations on this trip, it is clear there is a complete breakdown of the peace process in Burma, and that military offensives, humanitarian crises, and mass human rights violations continue to proliferate far beyond the Rohingya villages of Arakan State. Internationally there are so few people paying attention to the ongoing waging of war by the Burma Army against its own people, and to the government's complicity.

Many of our collaborators are discouraged, as hope fades for the more democratic Burma promised with Aung San Suu Kyi's election. But not one person I spoke with told me that they would give up in the face of these overwhelming challenges. This is their homeland. This is the struggle for their people's futures, and that of coming generations. Giving up is simply not an option.

Their courage, determination, and unceasing efforts are sharp reminders for me, living in Canada, well-fed and far from war. I too must persevere in my efforts to share their stories with Canadians, and to help ensure that Inter Pares and Canada plays as supportive a role as possible in promoting true peace and democracy in Burma. 

For more photos from Samantha's trip, and more information on advocacy efforts in Canada, visit www.interpares.ca/burma2018

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Rohingya refugee camp of Kutupalong near Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Much of Kutupalong, which sprawls for kilometres, has been stripped its mature trees, and the shelters are not sturdily constructed – making residents vulnerable to heavy winds and mudslides.



Ze Nyo (left), an elected IDP leader, with Samantha McGavin (right), in Janmai IDP (internally displaced persons) camp, Kachin State. In a highly publicized case, Ze Nyo's farmer husband Lahtaw Brang Shawng was arrested while living at Janmai, and subsequently tortured, imprisoned, and convicted. When Angelina Jolie visited Janmai in 2015, Ze Nyo was chosen by her peers to speak on their behalf. In Ze Nyo's small abode is a sewing machine that Ms. Jolie gifted her during the visit.

Refugee schoolchildren share a laugh. Community services offered by our Malaysian partners include learning centres for children, as refugees are not recognized by the Malaysian government and children thus cannot access state-run schools. Life is precarious in Malaysia for people from Burma, who can earn more here than back home, but in exploitative jobs. Constant fear of discovery and deportation, along with linguistic and cultural gulfs, keeps many people indoors, isolated, and depressed.



Mai Na IDP camp in Kachin State, Burma. In addition to housing and modest food rations, Janmai and Mai Na camps provide IDPs relative safety from the Burma Army. They are close to Myitkyina, which offers them both some protection as well as access to employment and schooling. Other, more remote camps have been attacked and bombed by the Burma Army as recently as 2016.



Samantha McGavin (second from right) and Bharat Biswakarma (centre), Inter Pares staff, with members of the Kachin Development Networking Group. Through community mobilizing, research, publication, and advocacy, KDNG focuses on human rights abuses and environmental damage linked to natural resource megaprojects. In collaboration with other civil society groups, it also advocates for national policies that promote federalism, peace, and sustainable development.

Fuelling conflict in Kachin State. At the confluence of the N'Mai and Mali rivers, prized by the Kachin as their people's birthplace, the Irrawaddy is born. In 2011, a planned mega-dam just downstream would have flooded a region larger than Toronto, raised the water levels by 50 metres, and affected countless communities downstream. Opposition to the dam, which would have exported an estimated 90% of its electricity to China, was so widespread that the government suspended the project. Such divisive megaprojects fuel armed conflict in Kachin State and elsewhere in Burma.



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