

LAND WITHOUT EVIL

On the move with the rebels in eastern Burma

Something's wrong. In the Free Burma Rangers' camp, the soldiers of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) are checking their ancient machine guns, filling magazines with cartridges and clipping hand grenades to their belts. The sun is just creeping over the mountains, here in Karen state in eastern Burma. Dew clings to the bamboo thickets, and I'm freezing cold. I rub the sleep from my eyes and wonder what's going on. Up until now the rebels have merely been providing us with an armed escort, covering our front and rear in case of an attack by the Burmese Army. But I don't have to wonder for long. Today's orders are to spy out a nearby Burmese Army camp. The Rangers call this kind of watching operation a "reconnaissance mission". These operations are dangerous but vital - in order to keep tabs on the enemy's movements, and thus be able to stay one step ahead of them. Oh, great, I think.

Before we break camp one of the rebels asks me whether I'd like to have a weapon. He proffers a Chinese nine millimetre job. "It may get a bit hazardous today!" No thanks, I reply - though quite a different thought is crossing my mind. But no, I'd rather shoot with my camera and hope we won't run into the arms of a Burmese patrol. Then we set off on our march, wading through mountain streams, climbing first one mountain, then another, cross country all the way. It takes us three hours to do two kilometres as the crow flies. My arms are slashed by razor sharp grasses and thorns. I am following Tha-U-Wah-A-Pah, the white leader of the Free Burma Rangers, trying to tread in his footsteps and not think of the danger we are in. Tha-U-Wah-A-Pah means "white ape", and he founded the Free Burma Rangers twelve years ago together with a few Karen men. They are a peaceful resistance group, which penetrates deep into the war zone in eastern Burma and responds to the genocidal slaughter of Karen people with medicines and cameras. The Rangers take care of refugees, treat wounds and when necessary even amputate the limbs of landmine victims.

Dying is easy here. Any civilian may be shot without warning, or tortured, or raped. The snapping of a twig, the cry of a bird, every sound must be treated as suspicious. The squadron keeps stopping, waiting, listening. The KNLA fighters escorting the squadron search the path for mines. Just a couple of days ago a group of rebels shot two Burmese soldiers in an ambush, so it's quite possible that the Burmese have planted fresh mines in the area. I stare into the dense vegetation to see if I can spot anything moving, but all I can see is greenery.

For several weeks I have been accompanying the Burma Free Rangers on their humanitarian operations as they move around the war zone in eastern Burma. The Free Burma Rangers are one of very few organizations to push deep inside the war zone and document the war crimes and human rights violations being committed by the Burmese government. Week after week their reports fill many pages on the internet, and they read like the charge sheet for a war crimes tribunal.

I've had to promise not to reveal how I got into Burma. It was a risky undertaking to enter the country's conflict zone illegally, without a visa. Sympathisers of the rebels took me over the border hidden under sacks of rice and plastic sheets, smuggling me and my companions past the Burmese Army checkpoints. We followed solitary paths in the dense jungle, went through endless forests of bamboo and pine, across mountain streams and over steep ridges, past villages on stilts daubed onto mountainsides and valleys as if with a paintbrush. It was a magical world, preserved in enforced isolation by the military dictatorship. We used to sleep with families in refugee camps, or outdoors in the forest. Our days were reduced to walking, eating, sleeping, then starting the same ordeal over again. Initially we moved only by night, as there were Burmese troops nearby.

Ethnic conflict in Burma has so far claimed 600,000 lives. Most of Burma's hundred-plus different minorities have given up their fight against the 400,000 strong, technically superior Burmese Army and signed a ceasefire agreement - among them the Shan, the Kachin, the Wa and the Chin. Only the Karen are still fighting for increased autonomy and equal rights, using home made weapons and mines.

War is draining the countryside of people. Hundreds of thousands have fled to refugee camps in Thailand, after trekking for days over mountains and through minefields. More of them are arriving every day. Out of a total of ten million Karen, most of them Christians, one million are living as refugees in their own country, hidden away in the jungle in ramshackle shelters of bamboo and banana leaves. Many of these people are dying of malaria, hunger and exhaustion; one child in five fails to reach its fifth birthday. Hundreds of thousands have fled to the camps in Thailand, where they wait to be accepted as refugees by Europe or the United States.

Almost all the leaders in the Free Burma Rangers are on Burma's "most wanted" list. The generals who have been ravaging the country and its citizens for decades would be only too glad to catch Tha-U-Wah-A-Pah, dead or alive.

"Psst!" says the KNLA leader, putting his finger to his lips. Don't stray off the path, he whispers. Mines! He pushes some branches aside with the barrel of his rifle. The outlines of an encampment detach themselves from the dense vegetation. I peer through binoculars. On the opposite hillside, hardly five hundred yards away as the crow flies, lies Maw Pu, the local divisional headquarters of the Burmese Army. I can see bamboo huts, bunkers, barbed wire, mine belts. "Those bamboo cages are where they keep their forced labour locked up," remarks Tha-U-Wah-A-Pah. There are five battalions, perhaps a thousand soldiers, stationed there, he says. Whilst taking photographs I'm thinking of that pistol. I can see six Burmese soldiers snoozing under a tree, and some forced labourers are carrying water vessels and firewood up the slope.

The Rangers get tripods and telescopes out of their backpacks and attach digital cameras to them. "So that we'll have proof, if any human rights violations come to light down there," says a man with the puffy features of a prize boxer, who goes by the name of Mad Dog. His jaws are busy grinding betelnut; he chews it all day long.

The Karen call their homeland "Kawthoolei", "Land without Evil", Mad Dog explains to me as he hands me a betelnut. We laugh at the irony. There is nothing here in the way of hospitals, roads, electricity, running water, trade or schools, though there are any number of landmines. It is a country totally cut off from the outside world. I feel as if I was in a kind of alpine prison the size of Switzerland. For twelve years Tha-U-Wah-A-Pah, the white ape, and his Free Burma Rangers have been putting up peaceful resistance in face of the repressive policies of the Burmese military junta. Armed only with food, medicines, surgical implements, radio sets and video cameras, the 48 Free Burma Rangers teams move from village to village, month after month, removing bullets from limbs, stitching mine victims together, pulling teeth, handing out vitamin pills, assisting with childbirth and helping refugees escape from the line of fire. It took more than a year before they trusted me enough to let me accompany them into the war zone.

We stare at the camp, pass cigarettes round, share the fried rice somebody has brought along. While stuffing my mouth with chicken I'm thinking about mines and firing squads. Hours pass. Mosquitos and leeches clamp their mouthparts onto me. Colourful butterflies flutter among the trees. Down below in the army camp all is quiet, nothing stirs. For hours they observe and film. But today peace prevails. Just a couple of days back the KNLA fired on the camp from this spot, "since when," says Mad Dog, "the soldiers have been afraid to come out." He

chuckles and runs his finger gently over his telescope, as if he was stroking an animal's fur. I'm dog tired. The Burmese soldiers are under orders to shoot any civilian on sight.

Hours pass. Tension gives way to boredom. Each one of the Rangers has his code name - Mad Dog, Black Monkey, Silver Star. I've been given the name of Klaw Pah Gwaw, which means "Male Red Cow", for one of the rebels happens to associate Germany with milch cows. But why red? "Because you're always out in the sun reading books, and have got sunburnt. We've been joking about that for some time," says Tha-U-Wah-A-Pah, squashing a leech. In the evening we learn that the Burmese Army has burned down a village two days' journey away. Some people were killed, and the inhabitants have fled.

Tha-U-Wah-A-Pah and General Ba Gyaw, the commander of the KNLA's Fifth Brigade, are sitting under a clump of bamboo studying a map of the area. Tomorrow 168 people, ten pack mules, 25 porters carrying back loads, plus equipment and medicines, are to be smuggled through an area under Burmese control with the aim of reuniting refugees with their families and getting medicines to the refugees. The mission is to take two months, and will be a logistical tightrope act.

But there are problems: on several occasions in recent days rebels have successfully lured Burmese soldiers into ambushes, killing a number of them. Spies report that an entire company of the army is now combing the jungle for rebels, and laying mines on the backwood trails. Still, General Ba Gyaw reckons, the caravan will probably be able to get through, for the jungle is vast enough. It's a calculated risk.

It's three o'clock in the morning. Harvested paddy fields and machine guns glinting in the moonlight. Nothing is audible except the padding of hundreds of feet as the caravan sets off. Nobody speaks, nobody even whispers; a tense silence is maintained. The convoy takes three hours to cover the five kilometres to the enemy lines. Their route takes them across the beds of streams and along jungle paths overgrown with vegetation, across steep mountain slopes to a road used by the Burmese Army to deliver supplies and reinforcements to their camps. Slowly, very slowly the group of rebels, villagers and refugees creeps forward, constantly stopping to listen in the darkness. Torches are banned and it's pitch dark. In the undergrowth, on a slope just inches away from us, are landmines planted by the rebels, while in front of us are Burmese Army boobytraps. A KNLA patrol has hurried ahead to clear the road of mines. They advance with rifles at the ready, in case any soldiers appear.

Dawn is approaching, and there isn't much time left. Right now we make an easy target for snipers; everyone needs to be over the road before the sun comes up. General Ba Gyaw talks into his radio and gives instructions. In front of us in the dawn mist lies the army supply road, which is unsurfaced and no broader than a village path. Things speed up now, and within a matter of minutes the 168 people have all crossed the road at a trot, fear written on their faces. Women and children first, then the porters, followed by the packhorses and finally the Free Burma Rangers. A number of rebel soldiers will escort the Rangers for the first few days. General Ba Gyaw peers after them with wrinkled brow until they have been swallowed up by the forest. Then he turns, marches back to his hiding place in the jungle with his bodyguard, and awaits the enemy. It's the same old story.