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Still not safe: the trafficked lives of Burmese refugees

Karen Zusman

Oct 2, 2009 (DVB)—The scourge of Burma’s human trafficking crisis reaches across Southeast Asia, with senior-level government figures now known to be complicit in a multibillion dollar industry.

Two years ago Di Di and her family were farmers in Burma. When her husband died from snakebite, the Burmese soldiers came and seized their land. One week later three soldiers raped Di Di in the middle of the day in front of all her village neighbors. Nobody stepped in to help because they were too afraid.

Ashamed and scared, she decided to find an agent to help her escape from Burma. Di Di met a man who told her he would take her through Thailand all the way to Malaysia, because she could make more money there. She didn’t have the funds but he guaranteed her a job and said he would deduct the fee from her first few paychecks.

Once Di Di got to Malaysia the man kept her under lock and key in a small room. She was let out during the day to work in the restaurant upstairs as a dishwasher. She never saw her pay and several nights a week the man who brought her to Malaysia would unlock the door and rape her. He told her if she tried to escape he would tell the police she was there illegally and they would put her in prison. When Di Di missed her period she told the man he had made her pregnant. He took her to a jungle hut outside Kuala Lumpur and made her drink a concoction of strong alcohol and bitter herbs.

“He made me lie down on the floor and then he stepped on my stomach, just to be sure to make the baby come out. He stepped on my chest and my belly. He made me go upside down on my head. He was very heavy, he looked like a giant and he stepped on me. He said: ‘If the baby comes out alive I will kill you.’ Then he walked out and left Di Di writhing in pain and crying on the floor. Fortunately some local people in the jungle heard her cries and called a Burmese community group based in Kuala Lumpur who rescued Di Di. When they found her she was still pregnant but barely alive.

As the situation inside the country deteriorates, Burma becomes a major source country for the trafficking of children, women and men for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation and forced labor in the fishing industries, factories and for domestic servitude. People are trafficked out of Burma generally in three ways: taken by force; sold by desperate and/or drug addicted parents; or lured by the deceptive practices of traffickers posing as ‘brokers’, ‘smugglers’ or ‘agents’ - people who promise safe transit out of Burma in exchange for a fee.

Once away from their families and friends the victims find themselves living lives as modern slaves in Thailand, Malaysia, China, and also in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Worldwide, trafficking is the most rapidly growing and third largest criminal industry after the drug and arms trades—its profits are quick and risk is considered low. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO) statistics from 2005, the human trafficking business generates an estimated \$US32 billion annually.

Recently there have been numerous reports indicating that some members of the Thai and Malaysian governments have been

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 COMMENT.Good intentions, uncertain benefits. For a person death by hunger strike is prolonged suicide;Buddhism prohiits it as self-killing. Analytically, it lacks indepth study of causes of military rule;no creative problem solving. For public good, 4 options:1.regime releases and meets his demands - NO chance.2.let him die. Most likely as he is not DaungDan BuuByi. Consequences 3. International outrage-chance close to ZERO. 4.futility of hunger strike - close to100 % chance. CONCLUSION: plea bargain for LINENCY; best outcome: exile back to US (not Zimmeh as in olden days) & become celebrity. \$\$\$\$\$..

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profiting from the sale of Burmese refugees and migrants. In Malaysia, the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) confirmed these allegations in a report published in April 2009.

Cases of Burmese falling victim to human trafficking abound. Htut Kuang had worked as a ferryboat driver. When the soldiers opened fire on his boat he fled and made his way to Malaysia. At the time he was 21 years old. "I just jump in the water and swim to Thailand. I didn't get to say my family goodbye."

After two years Htut Kuang received official refugee status from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). Ten days later, he was arrested on the street for not having a passport. He told the police that he was "an official person of concern to the United Nations," whereby they tore up his card and sent him to prison.

After Htut Kuang served his sentence, he, along with 11 other Burmese boys and young men who were with him in the prison, were loaded onto a bus for deportation to Thailand. At the Thai-Malaysia border the Malaysian immigration officials forced them to cross a small stream where a group of armed men awaited them on the other side. These men told the group that they had purchased them from Malaysian immigration for \$140 USD each. "You belong to us," they said. "We bought you from Malaysian immigration and now we need to make a profit."

Each boy or man was given a chance to call family or friends to raise the ransom for his release, about \$US700 per person. Htut Kuang called his mother back in Burma, although he knew she would not be able to send him the money. Not wanting to upset her he told her he was going away to work on a fishing boat and would be back soon. He hung up the phone and began to weep. One of the boys patted his back and whispered to him, "You are a good boy, a good son."

Htut Kuang's boat was so far out to sea he never saw land. Drinking water came by small ship and the boys ate the fish that were too rotten to sell. If one of them became sick the captains would beat him. If they didn't recover after a few days they were shot and thrown into the sea. Htut Kuang remained captive on that boat for three years.

According to the SFRC, there are an estimated 90,000 Burmese refugees in Malaysia. The UNHCR has registered about half that number. The US State Department's 2009 Annual Trafficking in Persons Report estimates 20 per cent of the victims unable to meet the traffickers' monetary demands are sold into forced labor and prostitution.

Nai Kasauh Mon is director of the Human Rights Foundation of Monland. The foundation, together with the Women and Children's Rights Project of Southern Burma, recently published a comprehensive report, "Nowhere To Go," which is based on interviews conducted with 71 Burmese trafficking victims between 2004 to 2009 from 19 townships in Mon State, Karen State, Tenasserim Division, Pegu Division, Rangoon Division and Mandalay Division.

The victims in the report are mostly trafficked from Burma into Thailand and Malaysia, but Kasauh Mon states that Shan and Chin girls are particularly vulnerable to traffickers who are looking for young brides to sell to men in China. The demand for brides is a result of the one child policy in China which has created a disproportionate ratio of males to females.

Another recent phenomenon involves traffickers who have infiltrated the refugee camps in Thailand. There are nine official refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border providing shelter to an estimated 156,000 Burmese people, most of whom have fled the junta's forces as they try to contain ethnic rebel armies. The largest camp is Mae La, housing nearly 50,000 mostly Karen refugees.

The traffickers pose as refugees and lure the people in the camp to go with their new "friend" who promises them jobs so that they can live freely, outside the camps. Once in the cities the refugees are sold to employers who do not pay them and commonly abuse

them, both sexually and physically. Like Di Di in Malaysia, because they are in Thailand illegally they are threatened with arrest and prison terms if they try to escape.

Suzie, a three-year old girl from the Akha tribe, represents a situation common to children who live in the bustling border towns of Mae Sai and Mae Sot. Her family immigrated to Thailand when Suzie was an infant. Because they didn't speak any of the predominant languages they struggled as street beggars. Several traffickers had already preyed on the family, deceiving her four adolescent sisters into working as prostitutes in karaoke bars where they thought they would be given jobs as waitresses.

Some time after the sisters had left, Suzie's mother, desperate to feed her little brother, sold Suzie to a man for \$20 USD. One of her sisters found out, and impassioned by the wish that her baby sister not end up a prostitute like herself, she stole into the trafficker's home and was able to bring Suzie back to her mother. All of the girls from Suzie's family have since been rescued by a local organisation in Chang Mai.

While policies inside Burma breed the conditions that foster opportunities for trafficking, many human rights advocates believe that the governments of neighboring ASEAN states are in a position to help eradicate the trafficking that occurs within their borders. Neither Malaysia nor Thailand distinguishes between refugees and illegal immigrants. As a result, neither has signed the 1951 Geneva Convention, protecting the fundamental rights of refugees.

If these two nations were to become signatories to the Convention the refugees might become less vulnerable to the entrapment of traffickers. Signing the Convention would also provide a stronger mandate to prosecute anyone involved with trafficking, including those within the governments' official ranks.

Perhaps Htut Kuang frames it best. When asked what he would like to tell the world about his experience, he looks at his torn sneakers and his usual smile fades. "I want the world to know what is happening inside of Burma; what our bad government is doing. But also I want people to know how we have to stay in another country where we are still not safe. Everyone here wants to catch us. We need the big countries to help."

Karen Zusman spent time in Malaysia recording stories about Burmese refugees and human trafficking for an audio documentary, www.pleasedontsaymyname.org

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