

September 1999 # 1

MESSAGE FROM SWAN

The aim of this newsletter is to inform the international community about the situation of women from Shan State, and to link up with other women's groups around the world.

The Shan State has suffered from civil war for nearly four decades. The oppression of the Burmese military regime has intensified since 1996, when it began a genocidal relocation campaign that has forced over 300,000 Shans from their homes. These villagers have been driven at gunpoint into relocation sites where they have no means of survival. Over 100,000 have become refugees in Thailand; about 50,000 are in hiding in the jungle. Many have been tortured, raped and killed.

These horrors have been conveniently hidden in an area cut off to the outside world by the regime. We want to expose the real situation in our land, and as the new millennium approaches, are determined to restore peace and freedom for our people.

We ask our friends around the world to join us in our struggle. □

Introducing our organization

What is SWAN?

We are a network of Shan women active in Thailand and along the Thai-Burma border, seeking to address the needs of Shan women.

When and where was SWAN formed?

It was formed on March 28 1999 in Chiangmai by about 40 women from different areas of Thailand and the Thai-Burma border.

Why was it formed?

In fact, before the formation of SWAN, Shan women in various locations had already been active in a number of projects to assist women:

- In Bangkok women members of the Tai (Shan) Welfare Association, "Kher Thai Mai Soong" had been involved in HIV/AIDS education, health and welfare assistance, legal advice and emergency support to Shan migrants, and Shan girls trafficked to Thailand, and networking with other Thai and international NGOs to raise awareness about the issue of trafficking.
- In Chiang Mai, Shan women working for various organizations, such as the Migrant Assistance Program, the Burma Relief Centre and the Shan Human Rights Foundation, had been involved in assisting women through Shan and Thai literacy projects, health programs, production of health and life skills materials and human rights publications in Shan.

- Along the Shan-Thai border, in Northern Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai province, Shan women had organized Shan literacy classes and Shan cultural activities, and had published Shan literacy textbooks and posters.

Even though these activities were already going on, and informal networks were in place, it was felt that more could be achieved, in addressing both the practical and strategic needs of Shan women, if a more concrete network among the various women could be formed.

This Shan women's network would also be able to make contact with the other women's organizations from Burma, as well as GOs and NGOS working with women locally, nationally and internationally.

What are SWAN's objectives?

- Promoting women's rights and the rights of children
- Opposing exploitation of violence against women and children
- Working together for peace and freedom in our society
- Empowering women for a better life
- Raising awareness to preserve natural resources and the environment

What has SWAN done so far?

We have set up a centre in Chiang Mai and have made contact with all the other women's organizations around Burma's borders. We have been networking with Thai women's groups on various issues, including the protection of migrant women from sexual violence.

Various SWAN members have attended national and international conferences to speak on issues affecting Shan women.

Our first bilingual newsletter, in Shan and Burmese, was produced in August 1999.

What other activities is SWAN planning?

- Holding regular meetings, discussions and workshops for members
- Organising of skills training for women
- Setting up a library/resource center of materials of interest to women
- Regular networking with other local and international women's groups
- Conducting research and documentation on issues relating to Shan women, such as trafficking
- A 'hot-line' emergency service for Shan women
- Regular production of newsletters in Shan, Burmese and English.

Our Symbol

SWAN's logo is a stylized image of the Kennari, a mythical half-bird half-woman, who is depicted dancing in a martial arts posture. The logo represents our desire to preserve our culture and to protect ourselves as human beings. The dance of the Kennari or "bird dance," performed by dancers dressed up in elaborate bird costumes, is uniquely Shan, and always comes first in any Shan cultural performance or major celebration.

The bird dance has its origin in an ancient Buddhist tale. When the Buddha returned from the Heavens to Earth on the Full Moon of the 11th month, spirits, mythical creatures, humans and other living beings came to pay their respects. Among them were the Kennari and her male counterpart, the Kennara, who danced for the Buddha. Theirs was the most impressive of all the performances that greeted the Buddha, and the humans who witnessed the dance decided to learn it and make it part of their own culture. Thus, humans dressed as birds replaced the “real” Kennari and Kennara.

According to our Shan legends, the Kennari lives in the deep jungles of the Himalayan foothills. This golden creature is not only beautiful but also warm-hearted and faithful to other beings. She is peaceful and eats only pollen from flowers.

We could think of no better symbol for our organization. □

SWAN members open clinic

On September 12, 1999, some SWAN members opened a health clinic on the Shan-Thai border to treat refugees in the area.

The opening ceremony of the clinic, which was set up in conjunction with local Thai Public Health authorities at Lak Teng village on the northern Chiang Mai border, was attended by local Thai government officials as well as members of the local Shan community.

The clinic is being supported by the AIDS Initiative for Mobile and Border Populations. It aims to serve the health needs of the thousands of refugees in the area who have fled from the civil war in Shan State. □

Against all odds

About 100 miles east of the Shan capital of Taunggyi lies the former Shan principality of Murg Nai in Central Shan State. Murg Nai is renowned for its fertile farmland, and most of the population are farmers. As in farming communities in other parts of Shan State, formal education is not deemed important for survival, and most families prefer their children to work on their farms after finishing elementary schooling. This is particularly true for girls, who up until today are encouraged to leave school early, help the family and marry by the age of 16 or 17. It is thus remarkable that over 100 years ago the best-known Shan female author should have come from such a community.

On November 7, 1854, in a village called Keng Weng Lao near Murg Nai, a baby girl was born to the renowned Shan author Sao Kanhse and his wife Sao Nang Hseng Swe. No one would have expected that the baby, named Kham Gu (“Golden Bud”), was to become as famous a writer as her father.

Nang Kham Gu's interest in her father's work became apparent from a young age, and he personally tutored her, passing on his extensive literary knowledge. Before his death at the age of 92 in 1882, he had taught her altogether 300,000 works of literature, grammar and verse.

The year before his death he also arranged for her to marry one of his most trusted pupils, Sai Saw Seinna, a traditional medical practitioner, astrologist and fortune-teller. Nang Kham Gu was 27 when she married, and lived to the age of 64, but had no children.

Nang Kham Gu wrote throughout her life, mostly about Buddhism, for example renditions of the Principal Virtues and Buddha Jakatas (stories of Buddha's past lives).

Her works were usually read out aloud at social functions like funerals. Ironically, it was only men who were allowed to read out such texts in public, and this is still true today.

Her most famous nonreligious works include a version of the classic love story "Khun Sarm Law and Nang Oo Pyin" (a Shan Romeo and Juliet) and a story called "Nang Tarm Ja" (meaning "The Curious Woman"). All of her works were written on palm-leaves and Shan paper and are now preserved in the Shan Museum in Taunggyi.

Apart from her prodigious literary output, Nang Kham Gu was also active in community welfare and charity work. In her village she helped the poor as well as the sick with the help of her husband. She taught women in her community to read and write, and led women to participate in social functions and religious ceremonies, in which she organized Shan cultural activities.

Given the enormous traditional barriers against women becoming educated, which exist even today, Nang Kham Gu is a truly outstanding role-model for Shan women. It is a sad fact that if she had not had the good fortune to be born to a gifted scholar, and if she had not been the only child, her story is likely to have been very different. □

Real Peace and Freedom

In April 1999, Charm Thong, a 17-year-old SWAN member from the Shan-Thai border, attended the UN Commission on Human Rights session in Geneva. Here is her account of the experience:

First, I would like to thank all of my elders, the Shan fighters, the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, and especially my teacher Mary, who gave me the opportunity to travel to the UN to represent my brothers and sisters who are suffering under the control of the Burmese military regime.

Attending the 55th session of the UNHCR brought me a lot of benefit. As a 17-year-old with poor English, it was an intimidating experience to meet people like the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the UNHCR Special Reporter on Burma Judge Lallah, and other people in the Commission. I had to bear in mind that my job was not only to meet these people, but to speak to

them on behalf of my people. I had only three weeks to learn about the UN work and responsibilities.

We were given only five minutes in each session to present our country situation and issues. I give three oral interventions in the sessions of Violence Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Migration and Trafficking. The countries which had ratified the conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child would present what they had done regarding the convention. This included the Burmese military regime.

I almost lost my self-confidence each time I had to give an oral intervention or talk at a public meeting. But then I thought of my people who I was representing. I believe it was their spirit which infused me and encouraged me to try my best. I was determined not to give up or make them disappointed in me.

During one intervention, tears ran down my cheeks. I didn't cry on purpose to impress the people attending. It was because of my feeling of solidarity with my people, and my sorrow that the situation in our country had not changed for almost half a century.

I was very interested to attend meetings with other women's organizations about CEDAW and the Beijing Platform. Because of my lack of experience, I could not always follow what was being discussed, but I knew these were important issues for us to work on in the future.

I learned that there are many women in the world who are suffering. The women of Burma are not suffering alone, and we have many friends who support us. But that does not mean we should not fight for our rights. We must present to others all the human rights abuses going on in our land, including rape, torture, killing, forced portering, forced labour and all forms of discrimination against women. But more importantly, we must really take action, working with local women and other women's organizations to find the best solution for real peace and freedom.

Charm Tong

Networking with Thai NGOs to demand justice over rape of Shan migrants

The Case:

On July 29, 1999, a Thai sub-lieutenant who had raped two Shan women and sexually molested nine others in the northern Thai province of Chiang Mai escaped prosecution by making an out-of-court settlement with three of the women.

The abuses had occurred on July 12, 1999, when the women were being deported back to Burma for illegal entry to Thailand. The Thai officer, head of the local Ranger unit, had detained the eleven women at his camp at the village of Ban Lan, close to the Thai Burma border, forcing them to strip naked and fondling them. He then raped two of the women.

Following the incident, three of the women, including one of the rape survivors, had reported the incident to the local authorities, and asked for charges to be brought against the Thai officer. However, on July 29, when the women were brought to the local police station in the town of Fang to drop the charges and make an out-of-court settlement.

Of the three plaintiffs, the woman who had been raped received only 11,000 baht (about US \$ 300) and the other two women, who had been forced to strip naked, received 5,000 baht each. A SWAN member who had accompanied the rape survivor to the police station was threatened by a representative of the Thai military officer that if she went ahead and pressed the case her life would be in danger.

The Action:

Following this incident, SWAN were seriously concerned that the officer would go unpunished, and that this would lead to further such abuses happening again. SWAN therefore sought advice from various Thai NGOs working in support of women's rights, including the Thai Foundation for Women, about how to proceed with the case.

As a result, it was agreed among 10 Thai NGOs to submit a joint appeal to the Thai Defence Minister Chuan Leekpai (who is also the Prime Minister) in which the following three requests were made:

1. That just and transparent disciplinary action should be taken as soon as possible against the officer who sexually abused the Shan women, and that NGOs and the media should be kept informed about what has happened in the case.
2. That government agencies should ensure that the officials under their authority do not commit human rights abuses against illegal migrants, particularly sexual abuse of women.
3. That in any future cases of sexual or other human rights abuses committed against migrants, the government agencies to which the offenders belong and any officials involved in the legal proceedings should ensure that justice is served fairly.

The letter was submitted in person by NGO representatives to the Thai government on September 9th.

NGOs that signed the letter included: The Friends of Women, the Global Alliance Against Trafficking of Women, Empower, the Migrant Assistance Program and Forum Asia. □

Rape: Targeting the military

Rape has long been used as a weapon of war by the Burmese military in their attempts to subjugate the ethnic peoples of Burma. Despite repeated documentation of this by human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, the regime has remained impervious to international criticism and the abuses are continuing unabated.

However, it occurred to some of the SWAN members working with SHRF that such reports would never be reaching the perpetrators of the abuses themselves. They felt that if reports were

printed in Burmese, detailing the names, ranks and units of the rapists, and distributed along the border and inside Shan State, there was a chance that they might fall into the hands of the soldiers and officers responsible. If the rapists realized that their actions were not going undocumented, this might prevent them from committing such crimes again.

The Women's Desk of SHRF has thus recently produced a booklet in Burmese, compiling all the known rape cases committed by SPDC soldiers in Shan State in 1998, listing all the rapists. One thousand copies of the booklet have been printed and around Shan State.

The book lists 67 cases of rape, although the real number is undoubtedly much higher, as many women who have been raped are too ashamed to admit to anyone what has happened.

Of the rape cases listed, 21 of the women and girls were also killed. The following is an example of one such case:

14-year-old girl raped and burned to death in Laikha

On 11.5.98, SPDC Maj. Myint Than and his troops from LIB 442 raped and burned to death a 14-year-old girl at a farm about 3 miles east of Laikha.

The girl was Nang Zarm Hawn, (not her real name) from Nawng Zem village, who had been forced to move to Laikha town in October 1997. On that day, Nang Zarm Hawn had gone with her parents to work at their rice farm, about 3 miles east of the town. The two parents went back to the town to get more paddy seeds, leaving their daughter at the farm hut.

At that time, Maj. Myint Than and 85-90 troops, who were patrolling the outskirts of the town, came to the farm and saw Nang Zarm Hawn alone in the hut. Myint Than ordered his soldiers to wait at the edge of the farm and arrest anyone who came to the farm. He then raped Nang Zarm Hwan in the hut all day and at about 4 am burned Nang Zarm Hwan to death in the hut and left the place with his troops.

Meanwhile, the girls' parents had been arrested and tied up in the forest near the farm by the soldiers. After some time they managed to free themselves and went to the farm in search of their daughter. Upon finding the burned corpse of her daughter, the mother's grief was too great to bear. She cried until she could no longer breathe, and died with her daughter on the farm.

Save the Salween

The mighty Salween River flows down from the Himalayan foothills, dissecting Shan State, before flowing through Karenni, Karen and Mon States and into the Indian Ocean at Moulmein. In Shan the river is called "Nam Khong", and holds a unique significance for all Shans, as exemplified in the popular Shan song by writer Sai Khorn Fah over 20 years ago: "As long as the Nam Khong flows, we will have Shan State."

Shan are thus resolutely opposed to the current plans by the Burmese and Thai governments to build a dam on the Salween River in Shan State. There are real fears that if the river ceases to flow, the Shan State as we know it will be lost forever.

In October 1998, Thai, Burmese and Japanese companies began surveying to build the dam at the site of Ta Sarng in southern Shan State. According to Thai government sources, the dam is planned to produce 3,300 MW of electricity, three-quarters of which will be sold to Thailand (which ironically currently produces a surplus of energy). The cost of the dam, which will take at least five years to build, is estimated at over 3 billion US dollars. It will likely be financed by loans from Japan, increasing Burma's already huge national debt.

The planned dam will be about 190 meters high, which will cause the flood waters to stretch back two-thirds of the length of river up to the Chinese border. The dam will have devastating social and environmental impacts: large areas of farmland and forest along the river and its tributaries will be inundated, and countless people displaced with no hope of compensation. Even if not submerged, forests in the area will inevitably be further depleted when logging companies move in to use the infrastructure built to serve the dam.

From experiences of dams in other parts of the world, the vast reservoir created is likely to cause outbreaks of dangerous water-borne diseases such as schistosomiasis, and the blockage of fish migration paths will destroy fisheries vital to uncountable people living above and below the dam. River bank erosion and salt-water intrusion at the mouth of the Salween will also adversely affect the densely populated Moulmein area.

Together with the dam-builders will of course come an increased Burmese military presence to ensure security of the dam construction and operation. The dam site lies at the edge of the vast area of Central Shan State that has already been devastated since 1996 by the regime's massive forced relocation program. Over 300,000 villagers have been driven at gunpoint from their homes, and thousands killed. The military installations that will surround the dam will inevitably inflict still further human rights abuses on the local populations.

SWAN appeals to the international community to join the campaign against this dam. The fate of the Salween should be decided by the people living along the river who will be affected, not by a brutal junta who will use it to further tighten its grip on power. □