

Across the Border Visit to Kaw Law Gaw, Karen State

Just 10km over the Burmese border from Thailand, Kaw Lah Gaw is a village with an air of complete isolation. The embattled enclave is home to 80 Karen families and Epiphany's biggest commitment within Burma.

The journey to Kaw Law Gaw is not an easy one. From the city of Maesot in Thailand it is a 3 hour drive south across the mountains, then half an hour along dirt-tracks once inside Burma. Getting across the border is a major hurdle in itself as the area has been classed out-of-bounds to foreigners by the Burmese government.

As our pickup truck reached the border we pulled over to rearrange ourselves so the two westerners on board could not be seen. Even though we would be by-passing the Thai checkpoint via back roads we were taking every possible precaution. Once across the boundary the difference was striking. The road disintegrated to almost nothing, the landscape was striking, but barren. We passed a deserted Karen



National Liberation Army (KNLA) checkpoint and I suddenly became conscious that for the first time in my life, I was within a war zone. This fact – and the possible reasons as to why the outpost was deserted – made me nervous.

Before setting off on the journey we had been assured that the KNLA tactic was to keep the fighting as far away from villages as possible and we were a comfortable distance from danger, but the feeling in my gut was much less reassuring. The momentum of the mighty (four hundred thousand strong) Burmese army takes some stopping. If they want to raid or raze a village, they generally will. The Karen Army try to get word to a village to give people a chance to flee, then the town becomes a new battleground for territorial supremacy. At other times settlements are attacked without warning, often during nightfall, where produce is stolen, animals are killed and huts are burned. Reports of murder and rape are widespread and the capture of villagers to be used in forced labour is commonplace. Under threat of their lives, Karen people are taken and forced to carry weapons, supplies, build roads, railways and guard gas and oil pipes. Kaw Law Gaw gets raided on average twice a year.

When attacked most Karen villagers aim to avoid any kind of confrontation with the Burmese Military so head into the jungle. Even within the relative security of the dense woodland, survival remains a lottery. The Karen have to take their chances living with no stable source of food or water, no fire (through fear of giving away their position) and have to travel through a terrain peppered with land-mines. Both sides lay these indiscriminate weapons; the KNLA in an attempt to protect villages, the Burmese Military as just another prong in their campaign to terrorise this ethnic minority.

At the end of the track an arch welcomed us to Kaw Law Gaw, and an armed KNLA soldier watched us by impassively. A tattered wooden church greeted us. An open field with goal posts at either end provided the community square, and huts to house 400 residents receded up the hill. On one side of the field stood our school – a small wooden construct made from sturdy Burmese teak



supported a roof in a complete state of disrepair. Inside was bare apart from the couple of dozen benches & tables and I tried to hide my disappointed that our funds could not equate to a better learning environment. But my disappointment turned to determination as the villagers started to gather in the school. Here I was, sat amongst people who had lived through such hardship I could barely imagine.

Through a translator I gave a brief message of solidarity, respect and compassion, and gave assurances that we would double our efforts back in England. I was told by elders of the village of the need for more school resources for the 102 children and 4 teachers; the roof needed fixing before the imminent rainy season, the old blackboard was the only visible teaching resource. But this was better than nothing, and without Epiphany there would be nothing.

I was taken on a guided tour of the village where on every turn I received happy smiles from children and curious looks from parents. I got a real sense of community and belonging, but also a resignation of un-ambition - an element of life understandably absent when considering the choices available: live on their own land in constant fear of attack, flee to the refugee camps of Thailand for undetermined incarceration, or head into the jungle and live to survive the next day.



A Solution to this enduring persecution remains elusive, but the benefit of education remains a consensus. It provides a future by allowing children to understand the politics of their situation and use this to lobby international action. It also gives greater economic possibility for improving their communities. And above all, although the village and our building might be destroyed next year or next week, education can not be taken away by this devastating war.

Micah Hampson
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