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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

The Longest Struggle

Directed and Produced by John Sheppard, (1993)
Transcribed by Darrell G. Moen (edited to 28 min.)

Narrator: There are, in the early summer of 1993, some 22 wars going on around the world. Here in these hills, a war has been going on for nearly 50 years. A war rarely reported, often apparently at a stalemate, but having a fair claim to one unenviable record: [it is one of the longest on-going wars in the world].

Burma has a population of 42 million. Two-thirds are ethnically classified Burmese, and the rest represent perhaps the greatest cultural diversity to be found in a small country anywhere, with over a hundred languages. There are seven main minority groups, and all have been in conflict with Rangoon. The largest are the 3-4 million Karen whose heartland runs along the border with Thailand and whose capital is Manerplaw. Manerplaw is a large military base with a civilian government organization contained within it. From here, missions go around the world seeking recognition for the Karen state of Kawthoolei.

But so far, Kawthoolei remains unrecognized by any single government. For the 5,000 or so under arms in the Karen National Liberation Army, their struggle is no less real just because the world ignores it. We are heading up the Salween River without the official permission of either the Thai or the Burmese authorities, accompanying a small headquarters unit under Major Robert Zan, returning to his area of operations.

The Major's task is to strengthen the Karen northern perimeter. On a bleak estimate, the Karen have been losing this war inch by inch for nearly 50 years. Their territory is everywhere threatened by Burmese advances. The Burmese have the towns and the roads, and they constantly bite at the Karen hold on the west bank of the Salween [River]. Even Manerplaw had to repulse a direct siege last year.

We were to visit the northern-most district of Kawthoolei, around the Burmese-held town of Papun. We moved about this area for about three weeks among a people in the midst of a war that has lasted three generations. We spent most of our time in this one

village, and visited four of its neighbors. Many of the villages hereabouts have been punitively destroyed by the Burmese, and we shall give no names.

Villager: [sub-titled]

Narrator: But the fact is, of course, that people do not go around constantly bowed down by fear. On this very day, news came of a 30-strong Burmese patrol operating only three valleys away. But the roof went up nonetheless. The inflexible imperatives of daily life in the hills, such as, for instance, that rice has to be pounded, do not allow time to sit around and fret about the Burmese. Behind the apparent normality, people are forced to take elaborate precautions.

Villager: [sub-titled]

Villager: [sub-titled]

Narrator: Everybody in the village can tell of ways the war has affected them personally. For over 40 years, every Karen family has had to provide at least one soldier to the struggle. This woman lost a brother. This woman worries about her nephew. This man worries about his son. For them all, in this long, drawn-out conflict, there is, above all, the random cruelty of the Burmese army.

Villager: [sub-titled]

Villager: [sub-titled]

Villager: [sub-titled]

Narrator: We could perhaps have forgotten the war. The pigs, after all, got fed every day we were there without fail, and ordinary life went on. But the small KNLA scouting patrols which pass through every other day reminded us of a sterner reality.

Villager: [sub-titled]

Villager: [sub-titled]

Villager: [sub-titled]

Narrator: Relations between the Burmese and the Karen have never been good. But this is no longer simply an ethnic conflict. In 1988, the Burmese military dictatorship halted the country's latest steps towards democratic government, and since then, these Karen hills have given shelter to thousands of refugees from the Burmese army.

The Karen struggle is now just one part of a general struggle for democracy in the country as a whole. Half the men in this unit are actually Burmese, and Karen spokesmen now talk of achieving autonomy for Kawthoolei within a democratic Burma rather than independent nationhood. But how far away might that be? We put it to Major Zan that Rangoon has lately making overtures about its willingness to discuss democracy.

Major Zan: [sub-titled]

Narrator: The district's problems are, of course, compounded by the influx of refugees. Out of a population of 150,000, 30,000 in this district are people displaced by the Burmese. This woman, for example, a Karen who came originally from these hills, returned only two years ago after 25 years working as a school teacher down in the district town of Papun.

Villager: [sub-titled]

Narrator: Her eldest son, having come to adulthood with experience only of town life, is getting to grips with what it takes to be a hill farmer. He too is glad to be away from the town.

Villager: [sub-titled]

Villager: [sub-titled]

Narrator: In fact, the teacher's son had other reasons to be well-shot of town life as we learned later when he stood up in church.

Villager: [sub-titled]

Narrator: Up in the hills, the former [bully] can no longer be terrible to friends, particularly his new friends since he relies so much on their knowledge of how to get a living up here.

Villager: [sub-titled]

Narrator: These Karen are slash and burn farmers. A section of forest is hacked down towards the end of the dry season and the debris is burned. At the beginning of the wet season, seeds are planted among the stumps. With constant weeding, this should provide an autumn harvest of rice sufficient for a family for a year. Thereafter, that section of hillside is supposed to be left to regenerate for 12 to 15 years.

Villager: [sub-titled]

Narrator: Some proponents of development condemn slash and burn as a wasteful and primitive system harmful to the ecological balance which should be replaced as soon as possible by modern, efficient terraced fields. Others contend that slash and burn is in fact apt and sustainable for hill societies like this. The snag is, the new arrivals.

Villager: [sub-titled]

Narrator: Historically, the 15-year field rotation sustained the people and gave the forest time to regenerate. But with the increased population, the 15-year cycle is being cut shorter. And even worse, new parts of the forest never previously exploited are being cut down.

One evening, we sat down with two people from different sides of the village population. On the one hand, the recently arrived school teacher from town, and on the other, one of the oldest inhabitants, who fought with the British here in World War Two. They talked first of their feelings about the Burmese.

Villager: [sub-titled]

Villager: [sub-titled]

Narrator: Both sides in this war use mines extensively. This mine laying on an approach path to a hilltop strongpoint is a Karen defense against Burmese incursion. The local people know to avoid this hilltop, so the hope is that the mines will only hurt Burmese [soldiers]. But unfortunately, the Burmese routinely force villagers to walk along paths like this, acting as human minesweepers. A mine is a weapon whose eventual victim could just as well be friend or foe.

Major Zan: [sub-titled]

Villager: [sub-titled]

Narrator: Religion doesn't divide the village. The first Christian convert makes music with two friends who follow the old ways. His xylophone, tuned with a machete, will only make music this one afternoon. Within hours, dried out, it will be no more than a bunch of sticks.

Villager: [sub-titled]

Villager: [sub-titled]

Villager: [sub-titled]

Villager: [sub-titled]

Major Zan: [sub-titled]

[end]

Group discussion questions:

1. Why does the world ignore the war now on-going for 50 years in Burma?
2. Why does the international media only focus on the pro-democracy movement led by Aung San Suu Kyii?
3. Why do you think the teacher's son drank heavily and mistreated his wife, mother, and children while living in the lowlands amongst ethnic Burmese?