

When women stand up to tyrants: The consequences are frightening but the victories are sweet. Patricia Elliott meets a group of women who caught Burma's brutal dictatorship off guard.

Briarpatch

| July 01, 2003 | Elliott, Patricia

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Nay Ley stands in silence, in the shadow of a small hut in a clearing at the foot of the Shan mountains, on the borderlands between Burma and Thailand. Her husband and two children have gone into the jungle to catch birds, leaving her to tend the buffalo and cows.

But she's not alone. The soldier with the bars on his shoulder has come. He's like a tiger, watching the lone one fall back from the herd. With one eye on Nar Ley (her name has been changed), he walks up to her banana tree and begins helping himself to the fruit. He waits for her to make a move in protest. His men in turn watch their officer, waiting for their lesson on the treatment of civilians who get in the way. Tigers hunt alone, and for themselves. Men do neither.

This is what war does to women. It grabs them by the hair. It places the pistol to the temple. It forces them to their knees. Then it forces them to their backs. It rapes them, then it kills them. Or it leaves them alive to face the scorn.

In this case, Nar Ley is left alive to hear her husband call her a prostitute. He offers to build her a hut in the jungle--if she wants to sell sex to soldiers, she can do it there. She lives to hear her children say, "You're not our mother. You're a whore. Leave us." So she leaves--*soomto*, a spoiled fruit. She follows the path into the jungle, disappearing into a world of shadows, of creaking insects and hidden landmines. Again, she's not alone. There are others in the jungle. They are known as the IDP's--internally displaced people. 365,000 of them are scattered throughout the ethnic highlands of Burma. They are victims of 41 years of military dictatorship and civil war. They have little camps and gathering spots. They are always on the run.

Some, like Nar Ley, are Lahu people. Others are Tai, Karen, Lisu, Pa'O, to name just a few of more than 30 ethnic groups that comprise an estimated one-third of Burma's 50 million people.

Although oppression runs deep throughout Burma, Nar Ley's homeland, Shan State, has been singled out with a particular vengeance because of its strategic location in a lucrative cross-border trade with Thailand. Since March 1966, 300,000 villagers have been forced out of their villages at gunpoint and directed to resettlement camps near Burma Army bases, where the

people are made to serve as porters, road-builders and human landmine sweepers. About 150,000 of the displaced have since escaped to Thailand, crossing the border at a rate of 1,000 a day.

In the jungle Nar Ley meets a young student who can read and write. The student listens to Nar Ley's story, really listens. What's more, she jots down notes in a sodden notebook. Nar Ley offers all the details she can remember. The soldier was from the Burma Army. He was a member of the Light Infantry Battalion 333 out of Mong Sart. It happened in May.

The student says goodbye. She has a long and risky journey ahead. She carries Nar Ley's story out from Shan State, across the Thai border to a hidden house in Chiang Mai, where other women are waiting. The women call themselves the Shan Women's Action Network - SWAN. They have teamed up with the Shan Human Rights Foundation (SHRF) in an effort to verify rape accounts the SHRF has been noting over the past several years, among a flood of other human rights abuses.

Combining their notes with the SHRF files, the women consider the tortuous but clearly remembered accounts of 625 women and girls. They make some quick calculations: 25 percent of the attacks ended in death, 52 military battalions were involved, 83 percent of the assaults were carried out by officers. The rapes, they conclude, are an illegal and deliberate act of war against ethnic people.

The women put all the stories down on paper. They devise a chart, with dates, locations, battalions and, when known, the names of the rapists. Then they visit a print shop. They publish everything, names and all.

On June 19, 2002, License to Rape is officially released. The joint SHRF-SWAN report causes an immediate sensation. Media calls flood in from around the world. Everyone wants a copy.

The women will tell you their name--SWAN--is no accident. They feel like swans. They've broken the silence on military rape for the first time, in a big way.

But that's not the end of the story. Taking on tyranny is no easy thing. There are repercussions. Burma's military dictatorship is one the world's oldest and most vicious. The Burma Army took power under General Ne Win in 1962. The general died in December 2002, but his henchmen rule on.

Masters of double-speak, they call their junta the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), and have renamed the country Myanmar, a name chosen to reflect the ethnic hegemony of the Burmese majority. Led by General Than Shwe, the SPDC claims to rule a perfect state. Conflicting realities are simply flushed down the memory hole.

Take, for example, the regime's report to the 1997 Beijing World Conference on Women: "The area of Women in Armed Conflict is not relevant to present-day Myanmar, since the country has been at peace for decades."

This country "at peace" has increased its troops from 180,000 to 400,000 in the past decade. Today there are 116 battalions and over 100,000 Burma Army soldiers in Shan State alone.

Young, traumatized, conscripted and brainwashed, the soldiers are engaged in a bloody, one-sided war against ethnic minorities and their own people--a war accelerated in recent years by the regime's desire to "clear the road" for multinational trade. Shamefully, 24 Canadian corporations--such as Robert Friedland's Ivanhoe Mines--are among the junta's top international partners.

Reports such as License to Rape don't help Burma's trade-face. At first the junta seems flustered. They've clearly been caught off guard. "Isolated rape cases may have happened. But systematically using rape as a weapon of war is just too ridiculous," Burma labour minister U Tin Win splutters to the press. On July 3, Burma's Ambassador to the United States assures his American counterparts that License to Rape is merely the "unverified testimonies" of "so-called victims."

The USA responds by sending a Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour (DRL) representative to the Thai border. On the first day, the investigator interviews 12 women and girls crossing the border. They are visibly tired, hungry and traumatized. All have witnessed brutality, including the torture and execution of family members. Ten say they were gang-raped by soldiers. Things are not looking good for the junta.

On July 12, the State Peace and Development Council holds a press conference to refute the "fabrications of the insurgents." SWAN is a mere tool for other, darker forces funded by narcotics traffickers, the regime reveals for the first time.

The women immediately hit back with their own press conference. One young woman, Nang Charm Tong steps forward to be SWAN's public face. Already known to journalists, she sees no point in hiding.

The SWAN press conference draws attention to an impending visit to Thailand by Burma's foreign minister. The journalists eagerly note the date of minister Win Aung's arrival, September 6, so they can ask him about License to Rape. So far, the junta's over-the-top reaction has been pure gold.

On August 2, Burma's ruling SPDC launches its own investigation to, in the words of Brigadier-General Thura Myint Maung, "refute the preposterous accusations." The Brigadier-General himself leads the investigation team, traveling at the head of a twelve-truck military convoy, each filled with eight to nine armed soldiers. From August 18 to 30, they round up villagers, ordering them to raise their hands and chant "The Burmese Army have not raped Shan women!" three times while a photographer snaps pictures.

The villagers are then forced to stamp their fingerprints or write their names below Burmese-language statements they cannot read. "I said I was illiterate but then the Burmese officer ordered someone to hold my hand and write my name," a 54-year-old farmer--whose two nieces had been raped--tells the Shan Herald Agency for News.

SWAN responds by publicizing the eyewitness accounts of the investigation in another press release. "At this point we were having fun with it," Nang Charm Tong remembers.

On September 5, the day before Foreign Minister Win Aung's arrival, 93 Thai women's organizations petition Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, demanding he raise the military rape issue in discussions. Later that day, Win Aung--no doubt alarmed by all the attention--abruptly cancels his visit.

Victory to the women. For now.

While the dictatorship desperately defends its army, License to Rape climbs to number four bestseller in the Chiang Mai bookshops. A second print run of 3,000 is ordered. But things are getting serious. No one is going to let a group of women get away lightly with challenging the ruling order.

Thailand has just invested \$US 8.9 billion in an unfinished gas pipeline, and \$US 9.5 million for road construction in Burma. These projects, along with talks aimed at opening the border to trade, were among the planned discussion points for the cancelled foreign minister's visit. Big money is being threatened by License to Rape.

When Nang Charm Tong first hears the warnings, she doesn't know what to think. When you leave the SWAN office, never take the same route home, people say. Something could happen to you. They sound serious. She starts following the advice.

There are rumours of a one million baht reward (\$US 23,000) for anyone who supplies information to a certain Thai informant for the Burma Army. A mysterious man pays a visit to SWAN's landlord, making inquiries about his tenants. At this point, SWAN is down to its last Thai baht. They owe money for rent and money to the print shop. They are in trouble.

Then the Thai prime minister makes his move. Deciding the estimated 500,000 Burma exiles living in Thailand are getting a bit too loud, Thaksin declares all non-Thai NGOs illegal and vows to repatriate their leaders.

The male-led organizations have good connections among Thai military intelligence. They can close their offices for a day or two with a nod and a wink. The women's organizations are much more vulnerable. The women of SWAN pack up their office and return the keys. They have no choice but to go underground. But they don't back down.

Today License to Rape is well into a third printing of 5,000 copies. It's been translated to Thai, raising just over \$US 2,300 in royalties. A Burmese version has just been released. Victory for the women again: they use the sales profits to buy a computer and develop a website, www.shanwomen.org.

This is just one activity in a busy program. If SWAN has an office in Chiang Mai, you wouldn't know it. Yet the organization-that-doesn't-really-exist successfully operates a refugee hotline, a community development internship program, a safe house, a sewing centre, a women's support

centre, several border-based clinics and schools, and an English and computer training school for youth.

Their male counterparts in the exile community are surprised and impressed by the women's success. They knew the women were investigating rapes - all very well and good but unlikely to have much impact, they thought. After all, some 30 rebel armies had been fighting the regime for decades without gaining significant change or international attention.

"Before License to Rape, we thought armed struggle was the only way and these women were wasting their time and energy," one male activist tells a journalist. "Now we've learned from them, from these brave women, that there are several ways to fight the enemy."

Another says Shan activists never knew about military rape until the report was published. "Our community is still in the denial stage about violence against women," says Nang Charm Tong. She and her colleagues will keep working to break the silence.

This is another thing war does to women. It makes them outraged. It makes them strong. It makes them fearless.

"We are proud for men to see women active and doing a good job," says a SWAN volunteer. Her eyes are shining. "We are so proud."

Patricia Elliott is a freelance writer and the author of The White Umbrella, a biographical history of Burma.

Cite this article

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APA

Elliott, Patricia. "When women stand up to tyrants: The consequences are frightening but the victories are sweet. Patricia Elliott meets a group of women who caught Burma's brutal dictatorship off guard." Briarpatch. 2003. Retrieved March 08, 2010 from accessmylibrary: http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-4153094_ITM

MLA

Elliott, Patricia. "[When women stand up to tyrants: The consequences are frightening but the victories are sweet. Patricia Elliott meets a group of women who caught Burma's brutal dictatorship off guard.](http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-4153094_ITM)" Briarpatch. Briarpatch, Inc. 2003. *AccessMyLibrary*. 8 Mar. 2010 <<http://www.accessmylibrary.com>>.

Chicago

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