

**THE ORANGE GROVE**

# FIGHTING FOR THEIR LIFE

**THE ISSUE:** In northeast Burma, Kareni rebels battle the military government for the survival of their people's culture and values.

**N**ORTHERN BURMA — It was red-carpet treatment as soon as we arrived at the Kareni rebel village in Burma late Saturday night before Easter.

The Kareni rebels finished building a meeting hut and lodging out of bamboo for the arrival of U.S. Rep Dana Rohrabacher and his party. Candles held by children were lit along the hillside path as the Americans met the Kareni insurgency leadership.

The rebel village was quite orderly, well-manicured, with at least half the population made up of children under the age of 10.

Very few males between the ages of 15 and 40 were visible. Many young males are either deep in exile or fighting. Most of Northern Burma is embroiled with armed resistance against a military dictatorship from Rangoon.

While Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi sits as a house prisoner in Rangoon, rebel groups are resisting the huge military buildup by the Burmese army. Last year alone the Burmese army spent over \$1.2 billion on new high-tech major weapons systems.

Earlier the Burmese voted overwhelmingly for the democratic opposition. The militarists nullified the elections and continue their genocidal campaign against the ethnics, including the Kareni.

When entering the Northern Burmese hill country, Burmese soldiers regularly round up any available young males in the fields, forcing them to serve as conscripted porters. The "porters" literally carry the munitions and supplies for the soldiers while the soldiers attack their own people.

The Karenis were virtually unconquered by the British in colonial Burma. Off and on for the last 40 years they have successfully resisted takeover by the military. Just a few months ago, the rebel headquarters was forced out of Burma and re-assembled in Thailand, in a jungle area next to the border.

There are some 2,500 armed soldiers under Kareni control out of a population of 250,000 spread out through the Kareni state in Northeast Burma.

Oddly, it is a Christian nation, comprised of Catholics and Baptists.

Our party was invited to the midnight mass and the Baptist ceremony Sunday

## SHAWN STEEL

morning. The irony of celebrating Easter in a rebel camp, with a people under attack by an ostensibly Buddhist government, is hard to comprehend.

The headmaster of the local school informs me that they have scarcely any supplies but are teaching reading, writing, and mathematical skills to the students, including a heavy emphasis on the English language.

Unfortunately, this Christian community is receiving little support from American Christians. The Rev. Pat Robertson is said to have produced a video, but no one at the camp ever heard of him.

The Kareni are resisting efforts by the Burmese government to remove them

from a land that they have occupied for thousands of years. They struggle to maintain their language, values, and culture.

Karenis support, with the other ethnic groups in Northern Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi's effort for a genuinely democratic government in which Burma would respect the rights of the ethnic minorities.

"Sonny," a young guerrilla commander and former student leader, pointed out to me before we left on Easter Sunday that he simply asks that the message of the Kareni people be heard: Burma must be stopped from committing genocide against the Kareni nation.

Mr. Steel is an attorney with an office in Westminster.

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**BURMESE LEADER:** Shown here addressing a rally in Rangoon in 1989, Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of the democratic resistance in Burma, was later taken into custody by the military government and remains under house arrest today. Photo by The Associated Press