



On the Thai-Burmese border
and in north London

CHILDREN OF THE GOSPEL

Chris

Reform

UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

May 1994

75p

In the jungle the Karen taught us about living the Christian faith

Chris Searle writes:

It was night. Like a wall in front of me rose jungle-clad hills, tops of trees showing starkly against the skyline. Above, a full moon, casting its pale light on the leggy stilt house with a teak-leaf thatched roof that was our home for ten days.

It had been a long day. We were up early, travelling by pick-up truck over the bumpy dirt track to Manerplaw, administrative capital of the Karen tribe on the Thai-Burma border, and reputed to be the most rural capital in the world; through a training camp full of drilling soldiers, under the banner proclaiming 'Give me liberty or death . . . KNLA'.

We were there among a handful of Westerners privileged to witness Revolution Day — the 45th anniversary of the secession of the Karen people from Burma.

'We' were a motley group of Brits who hailed mainly from Uffculme URC in deepest Devon. Our leader, URC member Dr Martin Panter, has made some 14 journeys into Kawthoolei (or 'land of light') in the last eight years and has introduced much of the primary health care, as well as training Karen health workers and doctors. His introduction to the Karen came through Timothy Laklem, director of Asian Tribal Ministries, who had been tramping the hostile borderlands for 16 years with the gospel of Christ.

Our group, which included two eye consultants, travelled to the Karen for three main reasons: to further the medical work, with three doctors and three trained nurses on our team; to clear jungle scrub ready for a new Bible School, and — our primary



With children at the Basogway refugee camp.

CHILDREN OF THE GOSPEL
A dramatic journey by members of Uffculme URC, Devon, to the Thai-Burmese border

objective — to share in evangelism with local people. Many of the Karen are literate and intelligent people with a loving and gentle nature and a deep faith in God, and they were to teach us much about living the Christian faith.

A large and growing percentage of the three million Karen in Kawthoolei are Christian. They have suffered great persecution under the Burmese. Indeed the revolution of 1949 was partly the result of the burning of a Karen Christian church, along with its 200 occupants, by the Burmese Army.

Forty-five years later they still defend their borders on the Burmese side of the Salween and Moei rivers, living in increased apprehension since the recent acquisition by Burma of £1.2 billion-worth of arms

from China, reputedly by their profits from protecting the opium trade.

We discovered one of the results of this hideous war when we motored down-river to visit a refugee camp of 2,000, called Basogway (or 'blessing'). We took with us clothing, toothpaste and brushes, soap and footballs, all brought from Devon as a gift from sympathetic Christians. Sharing in song, preaching and prayer with a group of up to 400 refugees, we asked to pray with those who had recently lost a relative. Immediately a forest of small hands shot up.

Children in the minefields

We found that in Basogway there are many orphans, some of whom have seen their village burned to the ground and who live with the knowledge that their mother was raped, or their father worked to death on enforced portage for the Burmese Army. Perhaps even more horrifying were Burmese children who claimed to have been forced to walk ahead of their own army to clear a path through Karen minefields, the fortunate ones escaping into the jungle to be picked up and cared for by the local villagers.

Over the two nights we ministered in the refugee camp there were many people who decided to become Christians. There were also so many who came to us to pray for healing that we had to break into groups, working with an interpreter to ensure that people understood what was being said, and that we were offering not a magic cure, but the healing presence of Christ within every situation.

We gave, but we received more, for we made eternal friendships in those two days. Their love, their gifts as we left and their parting song as our boat slipped away from the Salween's sandy shore, ensured a place in our hearts for these gentle, friendly people.

The Revd Chris Searle is minister of the Tiverton Group of URCs.



Members of the Uffculme group wait for a boat on the banks of the Moei river.