

Reform

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**Devon's mercy mission
to the Karen p11**

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and a bell for BoeBoe p15



The Karen people who wait in vain for peace

Chris Searle writes:

The pitch-dark night was heavy and sultry. Within the bamboo and teak refugee hut two candles gave wavering light to a strange situation. Squatting uncomfortably around the table were three Americans, a handsome Burmese Karen man, and a shrunken figure with a wizened oriental face peering from beneath a huge woollen hat.

The Americans numbered two from American Military Intelligence and one from the Republican Senate. The Burmese Karen was Timothy Laklem, Director of Asian Tribal Ministries, and the little old man was General Hto Hla who had pulled his troops out the previous day from a position across the river in Burma, which they had defended heroically for several months before being rooted out with chemical weapons.

Cryptic

There were others in the room, less important, but listening avidly to the cryptic conversation. They were members and friends of Uffculme URC in Devon, caught up in a situation which they had never expected when planning their second expedition to the jungle-clad border of Burma and Thailand.

It began as a return visit to friends made in villages and camps along the Moei and Salween rivers. In February 1994 we had celebrated Revolution Day with the Karen tribe in Mannerplaw, their Burmese capital. In January 1995 we learned that the whole area had been overrun by forces of the Burmese junta and that 10,000 new refugees had fled to join thousands of others long-established in Thailand.

Frightened

Among them were our friends, many of them children. Within a week of deciding we would still go, the people of Devon had raised £9,000 for us to take with us food and blankets, spades and picks.

With the help of Asian Tribal Ministries (a Karen-led mission) we penetrated deep into the hilly border area. Only half a mile from Burmese Army positions we came upon a group of 2,700 frightened people living in a dried-up river bed, under strips of tarpaulin. They were suffering from dysentery and malaria. Rice was their only diet and babies were dying because their mothers' milk had dried up. Children had fled into the hills from the initial artillery attack and had not been seen since. Two days later, as they attempted to follow us



A church service led by the Uffculme team in a jungle clearing.

to a safe haven, this unarmed group was attacked and some people, including a pregnant Karen woman, were killed.

Our 'safe haven' was a small valley between towering tree-clad hills protected by two Thai military policemen. A temporary hospital had been built of tarpaulin strips and bamboo. Disease levels were low, but food was scarce.

Five of our young people trekked in the midday sun to the next valley, taking much-needed supplies to refugees who had seen no white people or been given any aid. We took part in services in a clearing of the jungle and felt the Lord leading us to encourage them in their difficulties.

Our final stop was at Huay Kalok, where the night encounter took place, where we learned of the use of chemical weapons against the ethnic groups of the borderlands. We were invited to lead meetings at which many people responded to the challenge to listen to God, repent, and go on in obedience in their Christian lives, some making their initial commitment to Christ. Dave, an Uffculme elder, and I visited General Bo Mya, President of the eight million Karen, and were able to talk and pray with him.

Back in Britain, we heard on April 28 that one of the refugee camps had been raided, many homes burned and 2,000 people made homeless, and children slaughtered. We prayed for them at Uffculme, and wept. In our comfortable Devon homes we are unable to forget the gentle people of the borderlands who appear to wait in vain for peace.

The Revd Chris Searle of the URC's Tiverton Group of churches wrote of an earlier visit to the Karen in the May 1994 issue of Reform.



A woman in her 'kitchen' on the Thai-Burma border.