

A LONG JOURNEY



Daniel Zu with family in refugee camp

Daniel Zu, a staff member of STARTTS talks to REBECCA HINCHEY about his life in Burma and his flight to freedom.

The careless cruelty of the schoolyard can sometimes reach far beyond the initial hurtful words.

"I remember my teacher saying to me, 'You're a rebel'", Daniel said. Fellow students delivered similarly wounding taunts. "Are you Karen? Karen smell bad," he recalls.

As a member of Burma's second largest and oldest ethnic group (the Karen), it was a situation Daniel simply accepted at the time. Yet those early feelings of prejudice were the beginnings of a twenty-year journey that would begin in the nation's capital, through the jungles of Burma, to Thailand and finally land in the freedoms of Australia.

"The racism, the discrimination as a child, they were the seeds for my life," Daniel muses. Yet early life was not all blackness. In many ways, Daniel's childhood mirrors the carefree existence of those born free of persecution and terror.

Born in 1964 in Syriam (Than Lyin) near Rangoon, Daniel's parents were well respected in his rural community. Inside the government compound where they lived, Burmese, Chin, Kachin, Anglo-Burmese and fellow Karen mixed easily together.

Discipline was harsh and frequent in rural schools where Burmese was the lingua franca and Buddhism the national religion. But at home they spoken their mother tongue, Karen and on weekends they joined minority Christian worshippers for prayer services.

At 18, he succeeded in his final secondary school's assessment. Only ten percent of students achieved this result, and it allowed Daniel the pick of degrees in Rangoon University – Civil Engineering or an English major.

Daniel's choice to pursue education in languages pivoted his life's direction.

At Rangoon University, Daniel delved into the dangerous world of Burmese student politics. He joined multi-ethnic Christian groups

and organisations celebrating the arts and culture of Karen. The ruling military junta considered these groups 'politically sensitive' and kept them under regular surveillance.

By now an intense interest in politics, human rights and freedom of speech had replaced his earlier apathetic attitude. "You can't protest or oppose the government. You can't use 'sensitive words'. If you use words that 'disrespect' the government you would be in gaol. Ridiculous!" he quietly exclaimed.

His enthusiasm for ethnic-minority activities would send him over the precipice and see him exiled from Burma.

Filled with youthful zeal, Daniel presented a proposal to the university administration. He wanted students to be able to wear traditional clothing once a week. The rejection enraged him. The injustice. The hurt. It was so unfair.

"Out of frustration I started to distribute KNU [Karen National Union] leaflets," he explains "It was very, very dangerous. I tried to be careful, work underground

but..." he leaves the sentence unfinished with horrible possibilities.

Daniel had crossed the Rubicon. Without the warning of his friends, it is unknown where, or if, Daniel would be today. Those who spoke out were gaoled and grotesquely tortured.

Whispers from students he trusted alerted the activist. The Military Intelligence Service was on the hunt. This was the kiss of death. The end of his first life.

Daniel feels no regrets. "I wanted to achieve unity and diversity. I wanted us to live in harmony. By law and socially, we are discriminated against.

"I was aware what I would face, in government and private jobs. Your name is different. Twenty of thirty years ago there were some Karen with high positions in government, now there are none.

"The Burmanisation Plan; to expel all ethnic people in military and government. It is well known, but not officially. Every Burmese is oppressed by the military government, but most receive a single hit. We are double or triple hit.

"We want a simple life in Burma. We want respect for each other and each other's identity. If it applied its diversity Burma would be a beautiful, wonderful country.

"It could show up the world, it could be up with the best," he lamented.

He left with nothing. He told only one friend. His family had no idea. Saturday, the 20th of June 1987, celebrated internationally as World Refugee Day, became Daniel's Refugee Day. That was it. Rangoon no more, Burma no more, never again.

Pre-dawn he rose. The journey began at 4.20 am, protected by darkness. Daniel travelled with three other Karen campaigners and a roughly drawn map of the KNU controlled jungles adjoining the Thai border.

They took the highway bus, heading for the Hlaing Blue Township in the Karen state. For almost 12 hours they travelled, in a suffocating but liberating silence. Goodbye, but what of hello? Sadness, despondency. Enthusiasm, eagerness.

"The jungles were full of malaria and unknown people. Even though they were



Daniel Zu with family and wife Beh Beh

Karen, we knew no one, had no relatives.

"I felt fear," he admits. Overnight they were harboured by a name on the road map. A welcoming face. A brief moment of kindly smiles. This was to be the start of a journey of suffering, hardship, disease and uncertainty.

Arising Sunday, and joined by a guide, they continued for the township. The road was closed down. The military was conducting an operation. Troop columns, up to 500 in size, were driving past in buses and trucks, forcibly 'donated' to the military by the local population.

The road was menacing, but each moment of paralysis increased the danger. Their guide suggested a plan. Its audacity was frightening, bone-chillingly so, but choices were limited.

The quartet hitched a ride in the back of a truck with a heavily armed soldier; their presence unknown to the military official perched in front. The escapees chatted casually with the trusting young military man, posing as Burmese students en route to their families.

"We talked about things, about this and that, acted like friendly people from the city. We gave him some money, pocket money for him. We said *'Your life is too hard as a soldier, you defend our country, please accept our gift'*.

"It is a very risky way to travel. If the officer had known we were there he would have been very suspicious," Daniel

said. They passed the first check point, waved through without scrutiny as part of the military convoy. The convoy's next stop was more hazardous. More senior military officers were present and there were sure to be questions. They leaped off undetected by other vehicles hurtling by. It was an exhilarating moment, yet the threat was not diminished. The convoy would return.

Dressed in poor imitations of rural clothing, they walked a short distance before pausing for three nights in a Karen village, avoiding the road that might host returning military.

The all clear signal sent them off through the jungles again, this time to the village of Pita Kat. The main military operation had cleared, but some back-up soldiers had remained and the escapees six-day stop-over was punctuated by the sound of shelling and bombs.

It was an unnerving stay. Like the villagers they were packed up, ready, at any moment, to run. This village was considered the backbone of the Karen resistance, supporters of their soldiers. The people knew they could be attacked at any time. It was a matter of when, not if. After two nights, they continued deeper into the jungle, further from the Karen state's border, further, or so they thought, from the conflict with the Burmese soldiers.

"I was surprised. They were simple villagers, enjoying their daily lives as farmers and gardeners. Rice farming, orchids. Betelnut and Durian and fruit sellers.

"They were always ready to run, always on alert. When the Burmese Military Commission came, they ran into the forest, into the jungles, valleys and mountains that surrounded their widespread homes.

"The locals knew the escape routes, but their safety was never guaranteed, he said. By now the escapees were far into the territory of the Burmese military's enemy. Here, people only spoke Karen.

A stroke of luck befell the travelling party. A local medic and pastor joined the group, easing their travelling path. The two known faces brought with them familiarity and trust. No longer would they have to prove themselves at every stop. No longer would everything they carried, everything they wore be searched. Now they had a passport, two passports, personal passports.

On day 10 they arrived at the village of Mae Pa Leh, close to the headquarters of the 101 battalion of the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA). The Burmese military columns were close, the sounds of fighting nearby.

At daylight the village was empty. The locals hid in the surrounding foliage. At night they slipped back, catching precious sleep while the fighting lulled.

After two nights at the camp they were off, bound for Pah Kru, the last leg of their journey. The danger was palpable. The Burmese military were thick on the ground, but the students were not sure where. Another group joined them,

black marketeers, traders from Thailand. They proceeded together, carefully, slowly, trying to silence their movements.

A footprint appeared in their tracks. A soldier's boot with an elephant print by its side.

The medic, Gey Law Saw, was guarded. It was not the print of a KNLA soldier. The traders disagreed but the medic was sure.

He ran 20 metres ahead of the group. He would die to protect them if necessary.

Gey Law Saw returned with the dreadful news. They were trapped. A column of Burmese soldiers stretched in front, to the rear was the same. They were surrounded by enemy soldiers.

They moved ahead quickly, completely exposed. There was no protection on this road. The traders group rushed up behind them, Burmese soldiers in pursuit.

For two, three hundred metres Daniel ran for his life. Ahead were more military, Karen this time, a small band of five men. No match for the 500 fighters from the misnamed State Peace and Development Council that rules Burma with a ruthless brutality. They were still in pursuit, but knew this was not their home territory. Like the Karen, they also held fire, unsure who else may be waiting in the bushes.

The rebels and civilians joined forces, trudging together for one hour more. They could rest now. They had reached a large group of KNLA military. A feeling of safety returned to the group.

After a night's respite the party was back on its feet – Kaw Mu Ra – the final destination.

From here, life returned to a strange kind of normality. Daniel and his travelling companions became teachers, scattered across different areas of the Karen state, as the KNLA controlled areas are known.

Despite no qualifications or training experience, Daniel began to instruct his high-school students in English, social studies, history and geography. Like his fellow fugitives, the new teacher drew upon his own scholarly experiences, and the Karen curriculum guided his instructive

efforts.

The school brought Daniel an unexpected gift. Beh Beh; a quiet, stable character, whose serenity attracted the young man. A teacher too, they fell in love – the strong man and the peaceful woman.

The following year, 1989, he was enlisted by the Karen Health Department to assist with medical training in the villages. The simple farmers that comprise most of the state are largely uneducated, cut off as they are from the rest of the world.

Village children attend school for just two to four years. Their scant knowledge of basic medical care; sanitation, nutrition and other preventative practices piles on top of war and disease to cause shocking mortality rates. In these deadly forests people die every day from malaria, diarrhoea and dengue fever.

Two English nationals, both of them nurses, were aided by Daniel as they travelled through the state, distributing medications and teaching health education. Daniel acted as their interpreter and coordinator, and following them, for Shelley and James, a doctor and agriculturalist respectively.

After 12 months the young teacher was called back to the schools, this time to the remote Pa Pan district of the Karen state, far from the school of Beh Beh. PaPan is a mining town, where tin and wolfram are quarried from the soil to help fund the government of the state, the KNU. The area is a major black market route, a key port for the smuggling of goods through to Thailand.

The young teacher boarded an elephant, travelling through Thailand to his original Karen state home. The large beasts form the backbone of the Karen state transport system, together with boats. Cars and motorbikes are absent here. The terrain does not suit them and nor does the cost.

A new task was assigned. The versatile man was to set up a mission school, aided with funds from an overseas donor. In addition to the KNU curriculum the new institution incorporated bible studies,

based on Christianity, which is followed by more than fifty percent of Karen.

Daniel was accepting of his life of sacrifice, if not content. He longed for his family, to hear their voices, see their smiles, let them know that he was safe.

"I felt emptiness during this time," he said. It's this feeling which spurred his decision to marry. Daniel loved Beh Beh, but in different times they would have waited some more.

The official ceremony was moments away when hardship descended once more. Daniel was ill, very ill. It was malaria. He was checked in to the nearby KNU district hospital. The medic fed an intravenous needle into Daniel's arm, filling his veins with mefloquine. Notwithstanding the seriousness of his affliction, the staff sent him home with a drip. Daniel was young and robust. In the harsh, depredated world of the Karen, hospital beds were reserved for the most critically ill.

At first, Daniel could still walk, but after half an hour, the medication and the parasite began their deadly battle. Excruciating pain wracked his head and body. His limbs were stiff with pain and he drifted in a half-conscious state. Friends massaged Daniel's malaria ridden body to ease his rigid form.

On the 28th November 1991 Beh Beh and Daniel wed. The celebration was grand. More than 500 people spilled out of the church doors as students from their schools joined villagers in a feast not seen for years.

In 1992, Beh Beh joined Daniel as a teacher at the mission school.

For the next five years, they continued introducing rural development to the syllabus as the school swelled to 500 students. About a third of its pupils were poor village children, supported by the school to obtain a better education.

Agriculture is life in the rebel state. Rice is the staple; supplemented with cotton, corn, cashew nuts and chilli, which are consumed and traded with the neighbouring Thais.

The path through the Karen stronghold had become a major trading route for black marketeers and their Asian neighbour, supplying both the ethnic minority villagers, and through them, the towns and cities of Burma.

1995 heralded an advance warning; change would knock at their door once more. The Burmese army instigated a surprise attack on a KNLA post close by. No Karen died and the army withdrew, but the offensive left the villagers shaken. The school was temporarily closed as the small population relocated for three months.

In the mid-1990s multinational companies greedy for profits no matter what the cost joined forces with the Burmese regime and the Thai government. Their plan was to construct a gas pipeline through the territories of the Karen and Mon peoples through to the Thai mainland. Oil companies Total of France and Unicol built 649 kilometres of gas pipeline. It was fatal for the ethnic minority groups.

In 1997, soldiers of the State Law and Order Council commenced their genocidal operation. Tens of thousands of troops took part. The eleventh of February marks the Karen National Day, a time of great joy for the people.

In the three short weeks following that day, lives twisted, turned upside down in a flurry of bullets and bombs. Celebration became devastation. White changed to black.

"I left school on the 23rd of February, with the last group of seven students. I had to arrange to move everything from the school," Daniel recounted.

"I lost six students. The first sacrificed his life in fighting in the village next to the school compound. He was hit by a shell.

Thousands upon thousands of refugees surged across the Thai border, frantic for their lives. As they moved, leaders and professionals among the mass organised a refugee group committee, of which Daniel was secretary.

His lot, about 2,000 people, were trucked to the Tham Hin camp by Thai

authorities.

They arrived on 16 May 1997 to farming wasteland, long abandoned and overgrown with thorny bushes. It had absolutely nothing; no housing, no toilets, no food, no water supply.

Sixteen acres, or about 12 acres in size, it would quickly become home to 7500 desperate, traumatised Karen.

As Secretary, Daniel set up the residential area. Row after row, one metre apart, five square metres per family. The space functioned as kitchen, toilet and bedroom. With most Karen having five or more children, the space felt stiflingly cramped.

The first week was repulsive, horrific in so many ways. Each family had to clear the prickly plants, levelling the grass to form their temporary home.

The elderly and the young were dying of diarrhoea, dysentery and malaria.

Priority two was the water supply. These were parts one and two of the sort of sanitation that would minimise death.

Flowing on the edge of the camp was a stream. The management committee were resolute. Bathing in the stream was forbidden, water must be taken away in containers, no excuses, ever.

As the initial panic and chaos subsided, a feeling of hopelessness descended on the people. Despondent, they blamed the Karen leaders for failing them.

As a teacher, not involved with the administration, Daniel was spared the anger. "I became their hope, a prominent figure. I facilitated the best for them, liaising with international bodies and the Thai authorities. I took a management and administrative role – education, health, social welfare.

In June, the rainy season began to roar. Inside the tents, life was hell. Each family had six pieces of bamboo and one plastic sheet, not enough for a floor.

Death rates soared. One, two, three people a day. "We had nowhere to dispose of the bodies, we had to cremate them. Some people began to panic, seeing and hearing people dying all around. People started running away from the camp, finding friends and relatives in the Thai villages," he said.

Daniel traipsed from one rain soaked tent to the next, encouraging the sick and grieving with those whose family members had perished.

Deep depression was endemic. "I remember one elder, he was 65 years old. He wanted to eat fish but his daughter couldn't help, she couldn't afford to buy it from the Thai villages. It hurt him too much, he hung himself.

Surrounded by misery, malaria infected Daniel once more. Nothing could pass down his throat and he constantly vomited, blood spewing from his mouth.

Near death, he was given a drip, the lifesaving medication slowly restoring his health. "I couldn't be sick. Even when I was very sick my friends and colleagues, came and sought suggestions.

"NGOs came to my house. I had an abscess on my bottom, couldn't even lie on my back. I tried to tell them they could talk with other committee members. Physically I tired, but helping others helped psychologically."

Initially, permission to establish a school was denied, but as the days turned into weeks, and weeks into months and into years, the authorities relented.

An area was cleared and a church and school were erected.

Like thousands of camps before, temporary Tham Hin looked more and more permanent. From one school grew more, as well as a home for the hundreds of children orphaned by the war.

Ever present sanitation disasters threatened the health of the camp. Three years passed and already there was no room underground for the bodily waste.

"We asked MSF and the Thai authorities for flush toilets. Underneath our houses we dug pits for individual family latrines. They provided cement for the floor and material for the wall.

"We dug a pit in one corner. It filled. Then another in another corner. It filled too. The smell was a problem," Daniel said, describing the filth.

Everyday troubles took their toll, but it was the larger politics that endangered his life.



Daniel Zu shows Angelina Jollie water supply

In 1997, with the dissatisfaction with the KNU at its peak, a breakaway group, God's Army, was formed. The twelve-year-old twins who founded the group believed a goddess granted them divine powers.

Based on the Karen side of the border, they began to fight against their Burmese rivals. Although only 200 in number, the disciplined brigade scored a freak victory against their much stronger opponents. Their fame grew, and the word miracle was spoken.

Not until October 1999 did God's Army cause enormous problems. By then, the young warriors had joined with a group of Burmese student activists.

On the first of that month the student rebels travelled to Bangkok and seized the Burmese embassy, demanding a helicopter to return them to their base. The Thai government acceded, sending their deputy foreign minister.

What happened next changed Daniel's life. For him, and for the other residents of Tham Hin, it would never be the same again.

The student group, collaborators with God's Army, took a hostage. The Deputy Foreign Minister. Thai paramilitary surrounded Daniel's camp. No one in and no one out.

The Thai government was furious; instability that close to Bangkok was a national security issue. Their soldiers lined the borders. No one, but no one could cross. Together with the Burmese Junta, they got ready to crush the young infidels' army. God's Army had set up landmines along the border, inflicting heavy casualties among the Thai fighters.

Further outraged, they planned to cleanse God's Army from the area. During the intense fighting, a group of the renegade soldiers sneaked into Ratchaburi, Thailand, taking hostage of a bus.

On 19 January 2000 the student soldiers moved on seizing Ratchaburi hospital, demanding that the shelling stop and their wounded colleagues be treated. Twenty-four hours later, it was stormed by Thai forces.

According to Daniel, they surrendered peacefully, not wanting to hurt the doctors or nurses. "After a time all their heads were full of bullets. There was no trial in a court. Just ding ding ding," he said.

Restrictions were tightened for the refugees. Most of God's Army gave up. The elderly, women, and children, were moved to another camp.

Still, there were elements in the jungle. Treacherous elements. Searching for food in Thailand, they smashed up a store, grabbing anything they could find. The rebels began to shoot, killing seven men, women and children and one of their own.

The Thais knocked on the door of the Tham Hin camp. All 19 camp committee members were taken away.

Pressure came from all sides. The Thais wanted the God's Army cleaned up. Mostly the camp members sympathised with the cause of the rebels. They could not understand their leaders question of 'why would they want them stopped?'

"In any problematic situation, the camp committee is to blame. Every finger points to you, you, you, you, you," Daniel says. "We received throw letters; any-

mous letters, saying things like 'You are big dogs, watch dogs for the Thai authorities. You not work well for your community. You just work for your own benefit.'

"Many camp committee members ceased to choose working in this way. But you have to think, what is the alternative way? This is what you can do for your community in this situation. Just do it.

"My conscience was clear but my concern was for the relationship between the Thai villages and my whole community. Difficulties escalated. No one was allowed out, ever. Absconding refugees landed back in Burma. Before their actions, Karen could leave, if not officially. Now it could never be so. Non-government organisations were close, and even the United Nations was kicked out. Only a restricted health service remained. There was no going out for food, or work.

The monthly ration became their only source of food. Fifteen kilos of rice, one and half kilos of yellow beans, 30 grams of iodised salt, half a kilo of fish paste and one litre of oil per adult every 30 days.

Daniel felt camp life slip from his control, praying that one day he could deal with this conflict, contain it again.

December 2000 had marked another change in his life, change of a very different nature. In one day, Daniel's family of six grew to nine. Eleven year-old Eh Say, ten year-old Manu Pa, and six year-old Say Ne Blu joined his family after the death of their widowed mother.

The camp had turned four and a somatic illness had swept over their land.

For now, there was no hope of resettlement. At the Doctors Without Borders clinic, patient after patient presented with back, stomach and headaches. The medical personnel could not locate a physical cause; it was a depressive syndrome that was pervading the camp.

The daily drudgery of life, the lack of hope for the future, the suffocating restrictions, were taking a massive toll on the camps inhabitants. Unlike other Karens in the camp, because of his standing with the international community, Daniel was offered the chance to resettle in a third country.

The leader resolutely refused. "I will go when the resettlement opportunity is allowed for people in the refugee camp. I can't go and leave the community," he declared.

Two visits to the camp in the first year of the millennium helped to ease the situation in the camp; the first by the then British Foreign Minister, Robin Cook, the second by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Ms Sadako Ogata.

Yet still conditions in the transient camp were trying, and the frustration of those living in Tham Hin was exacerbated by the stories members were hearing from Karen working illegally in Thailand. Their treatment was appalling, yet they could not complain because of their status. Often they were given half or less of the Thai payment, if anything at all. Some Karen working on fishing vessels at sea often endured hard labour for months on end, only to be diddled of their wages when they returned to shore. At other times payment was received, but was stolen by corrupt police and paramilitary staff.

The situation fuelled the bitterness brewing in the camp. Meeting with the non-government organisations and international bodies, Daniel shared the problems of his people, representing the camp and proposing different solutions.

To ease their suffering he suggested three major strategies, expanding the camp area, establishing a vocational school and creating camp income-generating programs. The Thai authorities ignored the request. Any such move was viewed as a

step towards making the camps a permanent solution.

One of the international visitors was the United Nations Goodwill Ambassador, Angelina Jolie, whose 2002 appearance brought a small wind-fall to the camp.

As Daniel led her for a tour, she spoke with the families and inspected their facilities. Not only did she donate \$100,000 to the camp, but also she brought a generator, sports material and sarongs for the women. From her generosity, they were able to expand the camp a precious two acres on the other side of the stream, providing a space to play football, a place where they could breathe.

The money allowed Daniel and the committee to begin the vocational school with sewing training, cooking, a bakery, mechanics and agriculture.

"I called it the future preparatory class, for teacher or medic. After they graduated they helped teach in primary classes or took nurse training. Some, like [young] Daniel got involved in leading the camp," he explained.

In 1997, the Thai authorities firmly believed the camps would soon close. Eight years on, the situation is entrenched and can no longer be ignored.

It was in this year that the United Nations would begin a plan for mass resettlement. Countries from the United States to Australia agreed to accept the Karen.

At last, Daniel felt he could leave his people without blame, and began to prepare the necessary paperwork for his wife, three biological children and three unofficially adopted boys and girls.

He had already begun to train new leaders, people who were willing to work through the one million problems of running a refugee city. "Some leaders see it as a brain drain. I view it as an opportunity to take and develop life quality, profession and skills. It will surely be a brain gain in the future," he said.

"We have to give up something when we go to a new country and culture, but in other ways we can gain a lot of things; strength, development opportunity and

freedom." On the final night, Daniel sang a song of celebration and sadness. The winks of sleep barely touched them that night.

At six am on the 3rd of April 2007, the plane touched down. The Zus were finally in Australia. He paused for breath and then dived into deep waters. The environment had changed but the man had not.

Before his bags were unpacked Daniel was on the phone, sorting out difficulties for a family who were mistakenly being sent to Darwin. Within three weeks he had found a home for his family and was studying English in Fairfield. Concurrently he was learning basic computing skills and participating with others from Burma in a diplomatic training course.

In July and Daniel was elected as the Assistant Secretary for the Australian Karen Association. At about this same time he applied for a traineeship at STARTTS, encouraged by another community leader.

When Jasmina, a Coordinator at STARTTS, called to say stop searching for work, Daniel was very surprised. "I didn't expect to be employed with no Australian work experience.


Reserved and unsure, he seized the offer regardless. Nervous at first about his lack of Australian skills, he learned to relax among the diverse bunch at STARTTS.

"Colleagues here are friendly, more than friends. It's a family-like organisation. Each day brings a new encounter, a new slice of Australian life. Sandwiched between are the ingredients for successful support of community.

The qualities are crucial, given tragedy heaped upon tragedy for the Karen. Sixty percent of the people in the delta area who were ravaged by the recent cyclone are Karen.

As Daniel reveals to other refugees at a recent conference: "Be knowledgeable, able to interact with different people, always ask the community's opinions, trust them, deal with conflict and most important of all, never think about personal gain," he said.

It's a description of Daniel. ■



SUBSCRIPTIONS

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Refugee Transitions exists to report on a wide range of refugee and human rights issues of relevance to the work of STARTTS. It aims to:

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