

the AK *or the* PC?

ON A blustery afternoon last December, senior officers in the Kachin Independence Army gathered for lunch in the Himalayan foothills of northern Myanmar, just a stone's throw from the Chinese border, at a wartime military base called Pajau.

LUNCH was a classy affair, served outside on a picnic table next to the liaison office. The officers were in their 50s and 60s, and had fought the Burmese military in these mountains since their teenage years. Ever since a ceasefire agreement was signed in 1994, there has been peace in Kachin land. On this December day, the officers attended a graduation ceremony for Kachin army clerks, followed by lunch in the sun with two American journalists.

The food was rich and fatty, and attentive young soldiers stood by with Merlot and Johnny Walker Black. The officers leaned back in their chairs, loosened their belts and soaked it all in. Zeng Haw, a 61-year-old colonel wearing a U.S. Army jacket with BATMAN on the name badge, commented, "Before the ceasefire, we never had enough rice. There was no

salt, and we were always cold. Life was hard. Now we have wine and pork and American guests."

After lunch, two of the officers drove us down the switchbacks from Pajau to Laiza, their peacetime headquarters. On the way, they stopped at Victory Hill.

"Four hundred of our soldiers died here in '91," one said. "We killed 800 Burmese and took the hill."

Down in the valley there was no wind and military academy cadets practiced advancing under fire, a sort of one-legged crab run through the dust. These cadets were polite, smooth-skinned and eager for war. They wanted freedom and development. They wanted to fight Burmese.

"I have a degree in economics, but there is no job for me," said a 22-year-old, his AK-47 loosely slung over his shoulder.

"There are no good positions for Kachin people. There is oppression and exploitation everywhere."

"My generation thinks there will be a war, but we don't know what the leadership will decide. We will follow their orders."

THE KIA (Kachin Independence Army) fought an armed insurgency for over 30 years. Despite being out-numbered and

voices of kachin independence

ONLINE

www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCVDiU_pOic&url=

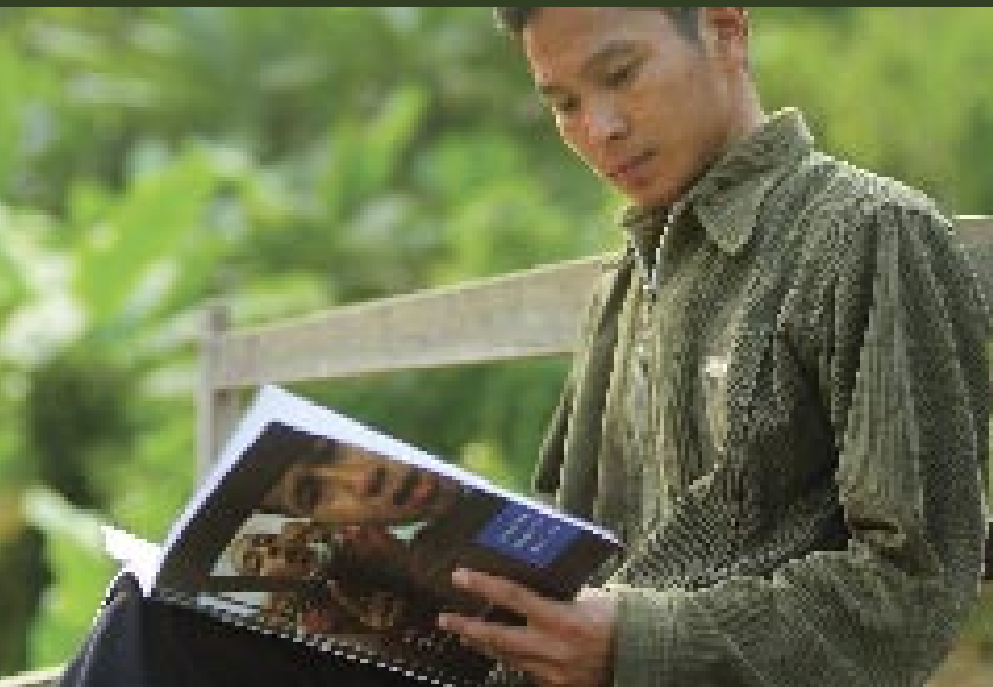
Ryan and Tim spent three weeks in free Kachin thanks to a grant from The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting



For young soldiers, war is an abstract idea. For the veterans who survived, the memories of death, cold, hunger and fear are still present in every hill along the Chinese frontier.



The Kachin flag displays a pair of traditional crossed swords on a red and green background. The red represents the blood of martyrs who sacrificed themselves for freedom. The green represents the natural beauty of the Kachin homeland. As the natural landscape of Kachin is despoiled through jade mining, logging and hydro-power projects, the anger of the youth becomes harder for their leaders to contain.



Possession of the Human Rights Watch report on the 2007 crack-down on Buddhist monks by the Myanmar military would be grounds for arrest, interrogation and imprisonment in most of Myanmar, but not in the territory controlled by the KIO.

The head of the Kachin military academy stands in a brand-new computer center located on the edge of the jungle near the Chinese border.



out-armed, the KIA was never fully defeated. Nor were they able to win full autonomy for the Kachin people. During 15 years of precarious peace since the 1994 cease-fire, the KIO (Kachin Independence Organization) has been trying to build up a civil society in addition to the army. Creating a civil society from scratch after a generation of war, isolated from the world at large and with scarce resources is a daunting task. Free Kachin now has native language schools, a TV station, intensive English colleges, a civil service academy, regular native language publications, a media center, several websites and a national library. These institutions are the building blocks necessary to even consider using any alternative to military force as a means to fight for autonomy. Most of these facilities however are still in their infancy.

The Kachins are desperate to engage with the outside world and keep abreast of modern trends. One military academy cadet described his generation's desire for development and frustration with the lack of opportunity since the ceasefire:

"Internationally, this is the era of economic development. But if we look at the economy in Kachin, it's been over ten years since the ceasefire and nothing significant has changed. We try to develop in many ways ourselves, but the Burmese military government hasn't given rights to Kachins. They gradually restrict our rights more and more."

Although indigenous Burmese opposition to the Myanmar military government has drawn attention in recent years, the ethnic insurgencies on the fringes of Myanmar are largely ignored by aid organizations and Western media alike.

History has shown the military junta will not just hand over power, even with a huge domestic demand. The more the world is watching and pressuring the military junta for fair elections the more likely they will happen. The Kachins, and all people under the Burmese military junta, need international support.

THE Chiang Mai-based NGO Documentary Arts Asia taught a week-long journalism and photography work-

shop to Kachin youth in November last year, giving cameras to the best two students and leaving several others for community use. One of the participants is using the skills he learned in the workshop, and the DSLR he received, to document Kachin traditional festivals. Documentary Arts Asia considers the media workshop a success, but admits that a whole lot more needs to be done. On the path of the sword, it is possible to buy guns and train soldiers to fight well together in a matter of weeks. On the path of the pen, it can take much longer to forge a group of people who can fight effectively with words and photos.

A KIO community organizer wants to study a Masters of Public Administration with emphasis on public relations overseas, so he can help his people communicate effectively with the international media should it start paying attention to his beloved homeland. Most Kachin youth with his qualifications leave Kachin for jobs in other parts of Asia and the world. He gets no salary but stays because he believes in a better future for the Kachin people.

The UN cannot help the Kachins, as no big power has offered any support. The media is their last hope for a peaceful solution, and perhaps any solution at all. They are really trying the path of the pen and calling on the international media for attention. But they can't do it alone. If no one answers their call they will, ignored by the world's governments and media, return to the sword.



RYAN LIBRE, a freelance photographer who has lived in Asia for 8 years, has taken photos for 12 books ranging from a direct democracy jungle orphanage to large communities of radical barefoot communist monks to a Thai vegetarian cookbook. He started Documentary Arts, Asia to broaden and deepen the documentary arts in Asia, and lives in a small hand-made adobe hut in the foothills of the Himalaya. www.idioimagers.org

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A workshop participant shows his final project.



Kachin military academy cadets repeat five pledges every day, at dawn and dusk:

1. "We will keep our promise to the nation and people for all eternity."
2. "We will fight for the independence of our nation and people."
3. "We will follow the leadership of the Kachin Independence Organization without deviation."
4. "We will always keep our promise to the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the nation and people."
5. "We will never give up our arms."