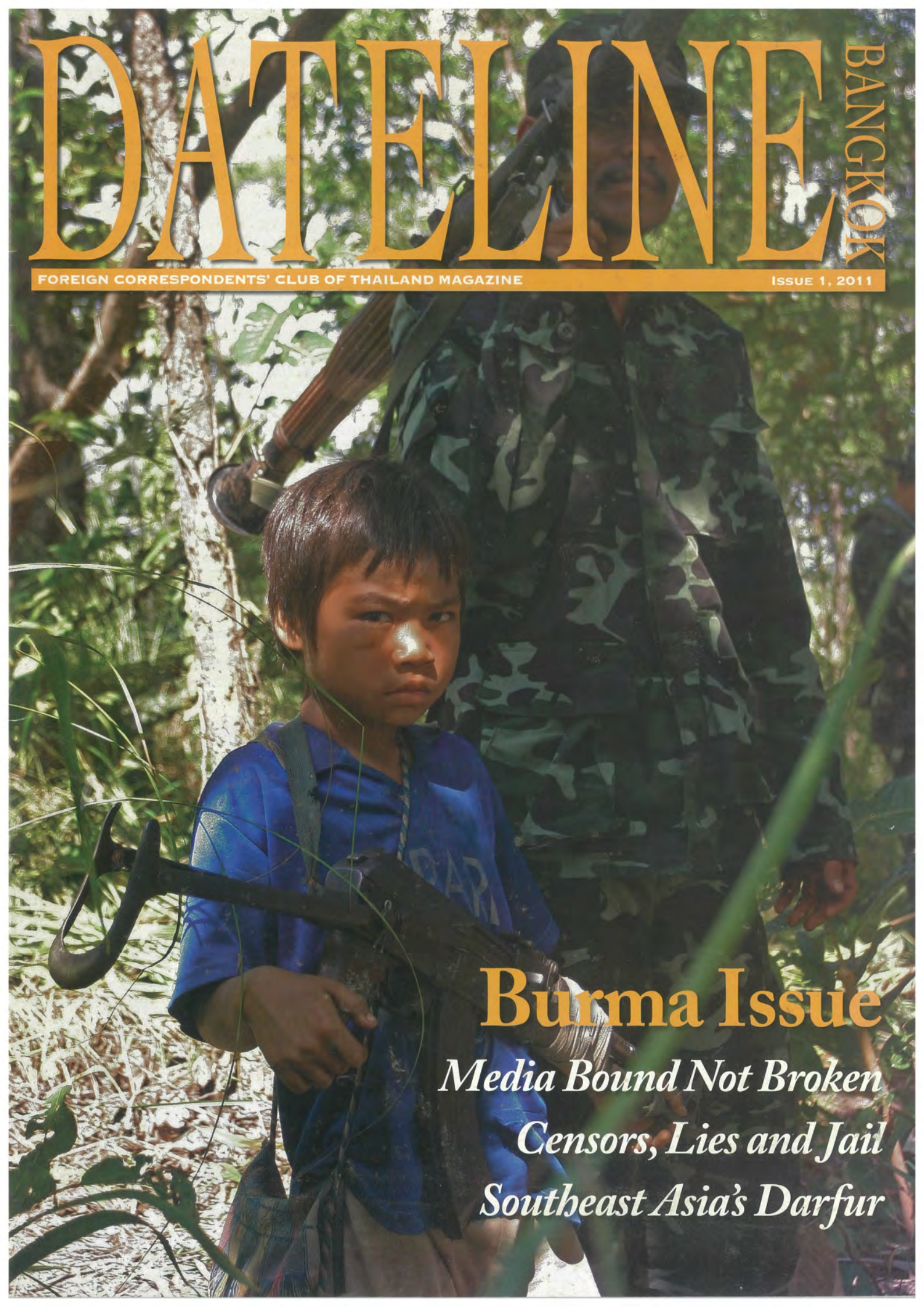


DATELINE

A photograph of a young boy in a blue shirt holding a rifle, with a soldier in camouflage behind him in a jungle setting. The boy is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The soldier is partially visible behind him, holding a rifle. The background is a dense jungle with trees and foliage.

BANGKOK

FOREIGN CORRESPONDENTS' CLUB OF THAILAND MAGAZINE

ISSUE 1, 2011

Burma Issue

Media Bound Not Broken

Censors, Lies and Jail

Southeast Asia's Darfur



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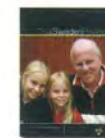
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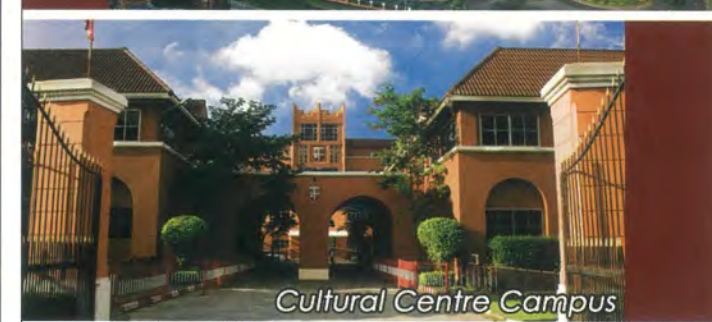
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A ROUND SQUARE SCHOOL



Happiness is Back

A tale of a Spinal Disorder Patient



Team of Specialists at BNH Spine Centre

Urai, a bank employee, had been experiencing pain in her shoulder blades and upper right arm for a few years. In May 2010, she experienced acute fatigue in her upper right arm that she could no longer lift it up. So she consulted a specialist in a public hospital, who conducted a MRI scan for her. Her doctor diagnosed that the symptoms were caused by displacement of the cervical intervertebral disc that compressed the spinal nerves (Herniated Nucleus Pulposus), concluding that the only effective treatment was surgery. Upon receiving the diagnosis, Urai conducted her own research on different surgery methods, and learned that currently there is a method known as "Minimally Invasive Surgery".

Urai was treated by a team of specialized physicians in the field of spinal disorders, led by Professor Wicharn Yingsakmongkol, M.D., Consultant and Director of the Spine Centre, BNH Hospital. She was confident of his ability in performing the surgery. The doctor performed examination for her and explained her the treatment approach, including options of alternative surgery methods. Urai could make final decision for herself. Her options were Hip Bone Fusion or Total Artificial Disc Replacement. The doctor also explained the advantages and disadvantages of each type of surgeries. Eventually, Urai decided to have the surgery in June, and chose the Total Artificial Disc Replacement surgery and it could be completed within only one hour. Most importantly,

she would enjoy nearly normal neck motion after the surgery.

As Dr. Wicharn explained, "The physicians performing the surgery were a team of multidisciplinary specialists. In addition, the medical equipment used is of premium quality. It is because we demand perfect surgical results. Every piece of medical equipment are certified by the Food and Drug Administration of their respective countries, in Europe. The artificial discs were made of an alloy material which was also certified by the U.S. All of these factors are important because we want our patients to be happy and confident, with no worries either before or after the surgery. We want our patients to resume normal activities as quickly as possible."

Urai was extremely satisfied with the surgical results; just days before, she could not even lift her right arm up to normal levels, but the next day after surgery, her right arm resumed up to 90% of its normal range of movement. She was also able to leave the hospital the next day. After a period of rehabilitation, Urai was able to resume her normal life activities, whether enjoying a backpack tour or driving her new car on her own. She has resumed her normal life again and no longer suffers from any pain at all - priceless by any measure!

"Spinal treatment does not necessarily require surgery. Some patients can be treated with medication, while others may require surgical intervention in case medication is not

effective. Treatment may vary for each patient, even for the same disorder. If a patient is treated at an early stage when the condition is not yet too severe, treatment will be more effective and recovery will be faster. Therefore, if you have been suffering from back pain for more than 2-3 weeks and have not recovered after taking medication, it is best to consult a doctor to obtain the correct, proper, and most effective treatment". Dr. Wicharn concluded.



Professor Wicharn Yingsakmongkol



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Cover shot: DKBA soldier Saw MunNah and his nine-year-old son Po, armed with an AK47 to protect himself and their village, are seen in the jungle near Walay in Karen state during a lull in attacks from Burmese Army troops early in January. Photo: Steve Sandford.

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Dateline magazine looks at the stories behind the stories. All offerings will be considered, from articles and photo essays to letters, essays, haiku or sonnets. How you covered a story, what you think about how journalism works, or even some gossip for the Soi Whispers column — send it all in, to editor Greg Lowe (greg.lowe@fccthai.com) or deputy editor Jim Pollard (jimpollard_1999@yahoo.com). Submissions are paid for with glory and bar coupons.

Reflections on a Challenging Year

By MARWAAN MACAN-MARKAR

Heading an organisation like the FCCT opens one to face unforeseen challenges. This stems from the growing expectations of our members and the wider community of a club that has in its over 50-year existence become the premier institution of its kind in Southeast Asia. There is also the converse, of being challenged for who we are. In 2009, my first year as president, the unprecedented development of a lese majeste complaint filed against the entire board remains a case in point.

But the events of 2010 tested the values of the club in a manner not experienced in recent times. Even as the newly elected executive committee was settling in, we had to grapple with an accusation made by sections of the Red Shirts that we were lackeys of the Thai government of Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva. This absurd charge arose from the Red Shirts being told that they had to cancel a planned press conference because the club was in the process of being refurbished. Yet a couple of months later, once the Red Shirts had converted the Rachaprasong area into their protest site, the FCCT increasingly found itself feeling the heat from the other end of Thailand's political landscape: to defend the foreign press in light of criticism from sections of Thai society who despised the Red Shirts. The position we took – standing for the right to free expression – did not stop our detractors from insinuating that the FCCT had a pro-Red Shirt bias and that we were blessed with extraordinary editorial powers to influence the reportage of the protests in the foreign media.

The manner in which the club had to respond to the politically turbulent months resulting from the protests deserves mention. Besides the programmes we hosted to hear a range of views – including what was probably the best night at the club when four critics of the foreign press were given the liberty of condemning the international media – we did our best to help journalists



based in Thailand and who flew into the kingdom to cover the protests. This even included the club's office manager, Khun Thanutra (Pink), having to negotiate with the Red Shirt guards at the bamboo barricades to permit our beer trucks to come through.

The e-mail traffic between board members probably reached a peak in May when we had to decide if the club should remain open or not as the military crackdown loomed. In the end, our decision to close the club for 10 days was based on one imperative: the safety of our Thai staff. And this may be a good time to appreciate the work that they have done for the club and, more importantly, the lengths they went to keep the club open despite the prospect of threats from the Red Shirts' guards. They are Khun Pink and Khun Pla from the office and Khun Roong, Khun Rienchai and Khun Santana from the bar.

It was also during this period that the board had to respond to the deaths of two colleagues, Hiroyuki Muramoto and Fabio Polenghi, who were shot while covering the April and May crackdowns. Besides issu-

ing statements expressing concern about these deaths and the number of journalists and photographers who sustained injuries, we spoke to members of the government to press them to investigate the circumstances of Muramoto's and Polenghi's killing. But the pace of the investigations and the reluctance of the government to reveal what the Department of Special Investigations has unearthed up to now have been disappointing.

Yet that was not the only disappointment in our engagement with the government during the year that has ended. We were taken by surprise when the foreign ministry exerted pressure on the club (another first, I was told) to cancel a press conference organized by a Vietnamese human rights group in September. We were approached to inform the speakers flying in from Paris that they would be denied visas and entry into Bangkok. Our position, as is now known, was to tell the MFA that we were neither in the censorship trade nor that we enjoyed the powers of the country's immigration department.

But in fairness it must be said that such disagreements have not interfered with the healthy and open relationship we enjoy with the prime minister's office and the MFA. In fact, to their credit, officials from both institutions were in regular touch with me during the crackdowns, wanting to know how they could help foreign journalists during that period. The fact that Prime Minister Abhisit has addressed the club twice in our traditional PM's keynote speech and dinner and plans to come for the third successive year confirms his willingness to engage with the club, of which he has been a long-standing friend.

The other highlights of 2010 were the following: the growing success of our annual photo contest, which attracted 7,000 images this year, a quantum leap from a few hundred in 2007, the first year of the contest; the Saturday in November when the club was

opened for journalists in Bangkok to cover the general elections in Burma; another successful year of the world film series; a full day session for journalists on how to stay safe when covering urban protests; the introduction of a new series of talks during lunch time; and publishing 20,000 copies of a soft-cover edition of The King of Thailand in World Focus, largely meant for distribution to Thai schools and universities to offer students some insight into how the foreign press has reported on Thailand's royal family for sixty years.

The club that you are in today is no more how it looked at the beginning of the year. A plan to refurbish this venue that was first discussed by the 2007 executive committee, my first year on the board, was completed. Other improvements, including upgrading

our audio-visual system, were carried out. And if the increasing use of the club by a range of individuals and organizations for press conferences, evening panel discussions and networking nights are an indicator, then it seems that these changes have been well received.

The ability to pursue with all that I have mentioned among our achievements, and so much more that had to be left out to keep this report concise, was only possible due to the commitment and dedication extended by all the members of the 2010 executive committee. I could not have asked for more in terms of team spirit from Nirmal Ghosh, Dan Ten Kate, Tim Johnston, Henry Silverman, Dominic Faulder, Greg Lowe, Anasuya Sanyal, Patrick Barta, Umesh Pandey, Tony Doherty, Jim Pollard and Justin Moseley.

There are some people not on the board who helped us in many ways: Lekha Shankar, Jeanne Hallacy, Somchai Homlaor, Sunai Phasuk and Julian Hadden.

I'd like to end by also thanking Mom Tin, our landlord, the Canadian embassy, and our major corporate sponsors Coca Cola, Pfizer, Unilever and Laguna Phuket.

This year has been an education on why an organization like the FCCT is so important in this country's and this region's political, social and cultural landscape. And I'd like to thank all the members whose support gave me an opportunity to be on the frontlines of the events that we had to face. Some of you were my friends from before and some I got to know during my second year.

Thank you and please continue to support the club.



The May 26 book launch by chef Poo with Australian slum dweller/activist Anji Barker and colleagues. Khun Poo is a long-time resident of Klong Toey slum in Bangkok. Over the past four years she has been running the Helping Hands Thai cooking school, a fair trade community self-help program that she built with four other slum residents.

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The FCCT gratefully acknowledges the generosity of our sponsors whose contributions to the Club's programs and activities have ensured we remain Bangkok's premier public forum. Please support our sponsors when you can, as they support us!

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A Big Thanks...

FCCT WOULD LIKE TO THANK ITS SPONSORS FOR THEIR SUPPORT OF THE 2010 CHRISTMAS PARTY WHICH WAS HELD AT THE MANDARIN ORIENTAL HOTEL ON DECEMBER 12, 2010. PHOTOS BY JULIAN HADDEN



Digital Development

LOVE IT OR HATE IT, DIGITAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS ARE REVOLUTIONISING COMMUNICATION AND THE WAY JOURNALISTS WORK. THIS ISSUE OF *Dateline* SEES THE LAUNCH OF A REGULAR COLUMN BY *jon russell* ON HOW THESE DIGITAL DEVELOPMENTS ARE AFFECTING THE MEDIA THROUGHOUT THAILAND AND SOUTHEAST ASIA.

Florian Witulski became synonymous with social media reporting in Thailand when, as a little known freelancer, he jumped into the action reporting on the Bangkok protests using social media. He took some time to reflect on his use of social media with *Dateline*.

What was your primary motivation for getting so involved covering the Bangkok protests?

My strong personal interest in Thai and Southeast Asian politics was the main reason for observing the protests but I was also compelled by a lack of international coverage of events. After the first rallies and clashes between the red shirts and the military, I saw pretty short and poorly researched articles in international publications and websites. I was also surprised by the Thai media whose updates were infrequent and often biased.

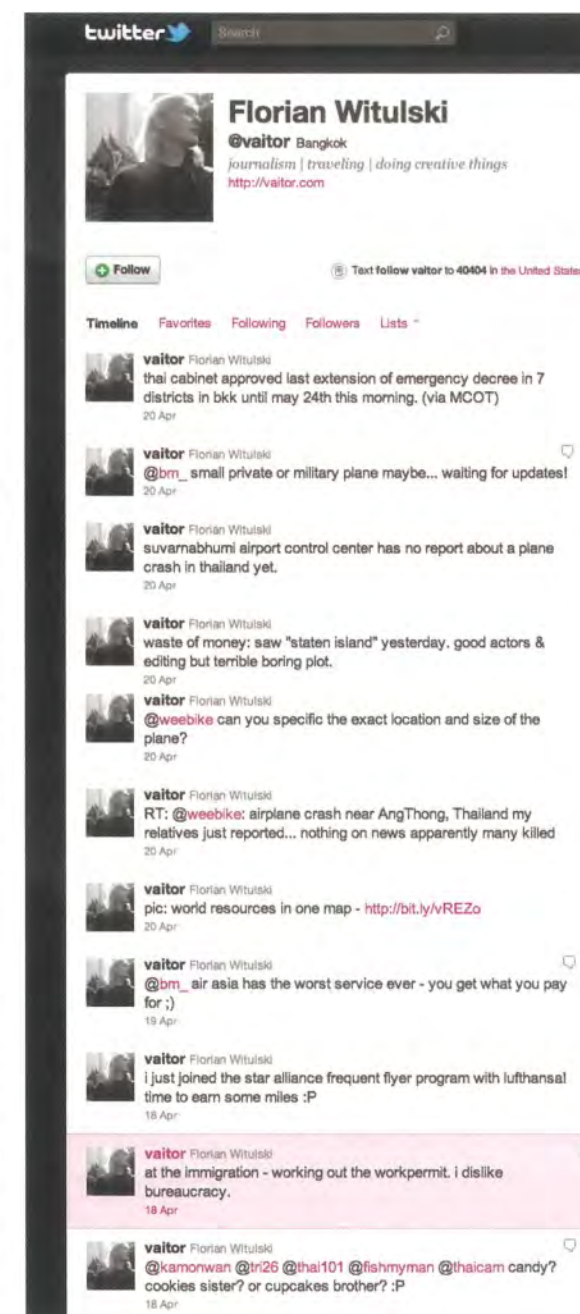
Has your experience and use of social media during the protests made a difference to your career today?

Yes, absolutely. I started using Twitter three years ago during the Iranian protests to stay in touch with friends in Tehran. During the protests in Iran and Thailand I used it a lot and gained a number of connections within the journalism world. This ultimately helped me to get noticed by the *Times Magazine*, France 24 and Al Jazeera all of which helped my career hugely. Several freelance jobs then lead to my present position as Asia Correspondent for IHA (Ihlas News Agency).

How can journalists learn lessons and begin integrating social media into their daily routine?

In my opinion it isn't easy to get started on Twitter, particularly for journalists who need time to build a network of credible sources. As with much of the internet there is a lot of content but most of it is not useful. A great way to start is following breaking developments from major news agencies as well as more-local focused outlets. I personally switched my routine of reading newspapers daily to a morning session on Twitter looking through my news lists. The lists feature is a great option to structure contacts and organize sources and stories.

Jon Russell is a social media consultant and freelance journalist based in Thailand. He blogs on the rise and impact of digital media for AsianCorrespondent.com. Follow him on Twitter @jonrussell





Burma's Media Bound, But Not Broken

PRESS FREEDOM IN BURMA REMAINS NONEXISTENT, BUT THE LEGACY OF MORE ENLIGHTENED LEADERS OF THE DISTANT PAST CONTINUES TO INSPIRE. BY AUNG ZAW

A lot has changed in the world, and even inside Burma, since the day more than two decades ago that a friend first showed me the antiquated printing cylinder he used to produce underground anti-government leaflets. It was in early 1988, just months before the national uprising against military rule, and my friend was a former political prisoner who had been a student activist in the 1970s. This crude device, which worked like a machine rolling out dough, was strictly contraband: anyone found in possession of one was looking at a prison sentence of several years.

Fast forward just a few years to the early 1990s, when I left Burma, and I can recall being dazzled by the technological wonder of the fax machine. Then, later in the same decade, the Internet came along, changing the media landscape in ways that even today we can barely begin to grasp.

It has been a breathless ride, at least for those of us living in countries where press freedom is recognized as a fundamental right. Within Burma, the pace of change has been notably slower. The Internet has finally made its way into the country, but remains strictly regulated by a draconian Electronics Act that makes cyberspace a dangerous place to express views contrary to those of the ruling generals.

But while Burma lags far behind in terms

of technological advances, it once prided itself on being one of the first places in the region to fully recognize the importance of media freedom. In the 19th century, King Mindon introduced Burma's first indigenous press freedom laws. In one article, he clearly stated: "If I do wrong, write about me. If the queens do wrong, write about them. If my sons and my daughters do wrong, write about them. If the judges and mayors do wrong, write about them. No one shall take action against the journals for writing the truth. They shall go in and out of the palace freely."

Right up until the early 1960s, these ideas would have been accepted as the norm. Burma's first constitution in 1947 guaranteed citizens the right to freely express their opinions and convictions, giving the country a reputation for having one of the freest presses in Asia.

This all changed in 1962, when Gen Ne Win seized power in a military coup. After that, press freedom steadily eroded, as Burma's fiercely independent journalists and editors came under increased pressure and many ended up in prison or forced into exile. Newspapers were nationalized and foreign news agencies were told to pack their bags. This marked the beginning of Burma's information dark age.

A new constitution in 1974 also granted freedom of expression, but only "within the accepted limits of the 'Burmese Way to

Socialism'". Even after Ne Win's regime collapsed in 1988, strict censorship remained firmly in place, reducing the country's media landscape to a mere shadow of its past glory.

But Burma's journalists – including a new breed of "citizen journalists" and bloggers – inside and outside the country have not given up. They use every new advance in technology to try to remain one step ahead of the generals, in many cases with great success. In September 2007, for instance, tech-savvy monks and citizen journalists managed to send news and images of a brutal crackdown on monk-led protests to the outside world, forcing the regime to shut down the Internet for several days.

Last year, however, the regime took no chances and barred all international media access to the elections in November. Local reporters, meanwhile, were subject to increased intimidation and scrutiny. Even those who viewed the transition to "disciplined democracy" in a favorable light were instructed not to write or report anything about the vote, but to simply publish the regime's own positive spin.

Those who hoped that the Internet might provide an outlet were also disappointed. A week before the election, connection speeds in the country suddenly slowed to a crawl, forcing Internet cafés in Rangoon to close their doors to frustrated customers due to "maintenance work" that was supposedly being done at the time.

Not surprisingly, election day was a non-event. The results were largely decided on the basis of advance votes, so there was little need for any excessive heavy-handedness at the polling stations. Only 25 Burmese journalists working for the foreign news agencies were allowed to cover the elections, along with two Chinese correspondents. A Japanese journalist who attempted to slip across the border

Photo: Nic Dunlop

was arrested in Myawaddy, opposite the Thai town of Mae Sot, while several local reporters were briefly detained and interrogated.

While the voting remained under tight control, the junta was less successful at keeping a lid on the situation along the border. A day after the elections, a Karen armed group that had rejected a scheme to turn cease-fire armies into border guard forces under Burmese military command clashed with government troops, sending around 30,000 refugees fleeing to Thai soil. This episode served as a reminder to the outside world of the complexity of Burma's internal conflicts, and of the need to look beyond Rangoon and Naypyidaw for a better understanding of the country's political impasse.

Despite this reminder, however, international attention soon shifted back to Rangoon when, less than a week after the elections, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest. Unlike the elections, this was an event that caught the imaginations of Burmese and foreigners alike. Foreign journalists who entered the country on tourist visas flocked to Suu Kyi's lakeside home, as did local reporters eager for an interview and an opportunity to push the envelope.

Several of Burma's heavily censored journals went out on a limb to publish photos of

Suu Kyi and her supporters. Burma's best-selling sports journal, First Eleven, led with a front-page story about English Premier League matches with a cleverly embedded message about Suu Kyi's release. By playing with the colors of three innocent-looking headlines – "Sunderland Freeze Chelsea," "United Stunned by Villa" and "Arsenal Advance to Grab Their Hope" – the journal spelled out the words: "Su Free Unite & Advance to Grab The Hope."

Needless to say, this did not meet with the junta's approval. First Eleven and several other journals were temporarily shut down for their coverage of Suu Kyi's release.

Now that the excitement of Suu Kyi's reappearance on the national political stage has died down, Burmese journalists are faced with a different predicament. Parliament convened for the first time in 22 years on January 31, but reporters are not allowed anywhere near the new Parliament buildings in Naypyidaw. Those who have tried have been chased away and returned empty handed.

Anyone who thought that the transition to parliamentary rule would bring some improvement to Burma's media landscape was sorely disappointed recently when a photojournalist, Maung Maung Zeya, received a 13-year prison sentence for filming at the

scene of bomb blasts in Rangoon last year. He now joins some 40 other journalists in Burma's prisons – including his son, Sithu Zeya, who was arrested last year in connection with the same incident.

Both men reportedly worked for the Democratic Voice of Burma, an exiled news agency. Like DVB, The Irrawaddy also has reporters inside Burma, as well as in Thailand. At our office in Chiang Mai, we meet daily to discuss the latest news and assign stories to reporters. Using cell phones, email and Internet-based instant messengers such as G-talk, we coordinate our efforts with inside reporters to get the most reliable and up-to-date information available.

Technologically, we have obviously come a long way since the days of King Mindon, or even since my first encounter with a printing press in 1988. In other ways, however, Burma remains stubbornly stuck in the past, and is even less free now than it was more than century ago. In the end, we expect to prevail in our efforts to restore media freedom Burma, but we also know that it may be a long time yet before we can return to the days of more enlightened leaders.

Aung Zaw is founder and editor of the Irrawaddy magazine based in Chiang Mai. www.irrawaddy.org



Censors, Lies and Jail

NAVIGATING BURMA'S NOTORIOUSLY COMPLEX POLITICS IS ONLY ONE OF THE CHALLENGES THAT JOURNALISTS COVERING THE COUNTRY FACE. PROTECTING SOURCES WHILE OUTMANOEUVERING THE RULING JUNTA MAKES VERIFYING FACTS ON THE GROUND A TOUGH TASK, WRITES **Phil Thornton**.

Reporting Burma is difficult. Rumours, speculation and misinformation makes verifying stories coming out of Burma hard. The military regimes forced isolation and its ban on the international media makes it complicated to check stories in time for news bulletins. By the time footage is smuggled out of Burma the story has often moved on to another international hotspot.

For local journalists working inside Burma it is an even tougher ask. Media organizations in Burma are tightly controlled. All media, including the state print and electronic media, is effectively controlled through the Press Scrutiny and Registration

Division. The nine-stage process can take weeks. All stories, footage or photographs deemed inappropriate are censored.

Hnin, an experienced Burmese journalist, said it's not only the censors that scare her.

"Someone disappears, we don't know if they been arrested or are in detention. If we are chatting in a teahouse and someone we don't know enters, we stop talking. If people are outside my house, I keep going. When I work, I worry that people I interview will inform on me. I'm scared about what they know and what they say about me...I don't know who can be trusted. This is my life. How can I write the truth?"

A western journalist, who for a number of years, worked for a Rangoon-based media outlet, says while the personal danger may have been less, the controls exerted by the regime and maintaining professional standards made her job at times unbearable.

"Nobody wants to talk to you and it's impossible to verify the rumors. The recent misreporting of Than Shwe's resignation is a good example, and everybody got it wrong. You can never name your sources and there're lots of shadows that keep people spooked."

And fear works. In spite of no longer working in Burma, the journalist declined

to be named for this article in case it caused trouble for ex-colleagues. She explained the complex process of getting access to Burma's decision makers.

"When you do get the chance to talk to a [government] minister they do tell you what the real story is and then ruin it by saying, 'you can't report or use anything I've just told you'. Instead they give you a load of waffle to use. Foreigners are not trusted and I've had translators edit out what they think is not important."

Up on the Burma Thai border a group of exiled Karenni journalists risk long jail sentences to gather news on Burma's national election on November 7, 2010. Working from under a raised bamboo hut on the Burma side of the border they plan their news coverage and distribution. Journalists hunch over battery powered laptops as they file stories to websites. Plastic chairs slowly sink into the once sun-hardened dirt now turned to clay from the monsoon rains.

Rangoon may be a long way from the border and out of the reach of the press Scrutiny Board's tentacles, but reporting is no less dangerous for these journalists.

Tee Reh, a former teacher, has been a journalist for more than six years and says one of his stringers, Bee Du, was jailed for 37-years for contacting the exiled media.

"He was only 25. The information he sent us was about one page of a small notebook. He was charged under section 17/1 and jailed for 37 years. I fear for our sources, they are always in danger."

Tee Reh explains that telling the truth is the hardest part of his job.

"If we mention names of people or the locations of villages, the authorities and ceasefire groups aligned to the regime, will hunt them down. This also applies to natural disasters, like mudslides or floods. Villagers are scared to tell us what happened or the extent of the damage and ask us not to name their village, they say the army will come and punish them."

Tee Reh says reporting on issues not related to human rights abuses or natural disasters also gets his colleagues into trouble.

"We recently wrote about illegally logging of hardwoods and it caused us big problems with people on both sides of the border with a business interest in the logs."

Freedom of the Press

In Burma press freedom is non-existent. In 2007 the Committee to Protect Journalists ranked Burma the second-worst country for media freedom, just in front of North Korea.

And in a report on Burma in 2008, Human Rights Watch fingered Burma as one of the "...most repressive countries on earth in terms of its restrictive press laws and its frequent practice of jailing journalists."

In 2009, Reporters Without Borders annual press freedom index ranked Burma 171st out of 175 countries and noted a recent example of the Press Scrutiny Board's paranoia and heavy-handed censorship.

"...a one-week suspension of the weekly *Modern Times* for changing the headline of

government media."

Kyaw Kyaw says journalists covering stories in Burma have to take risks.

"I feel scared when I cover stories. If they find my notebooks, or I'm helping the outside media I will be jailed under penal code 71 and 72 - I'll get two years."

Both Kyaw Kyaw and Hnin say they worry about their future, but want to remain in Burma, Hnin explains why.

"When we're outside the country all we hear is an echo of the real situation, it's hard to know what's real. Working inside we know our own sound, our own song, we know what the distortions of sound are and what they mean. It's our story, we have to stay there to report it."

Kyaw Kyaw worries about the effect of

"If we mention names of people or the locations of villages, the authorities and ceasefire groups aligned to the regime, will hunt them down. This also applies to natural disasters, like mudslides or floods." - Tee Reh, Burmese journalist

its weather forecast without permission... the possibility of heavy rain in September was given the headline 'Will it come in September?' The censors suspected an allusion to the 2007 Saffron Revolution."

Kyaw Kyaw and Hnin are working journalists in Burma. When they are in Thailand we meet in a Chiang Mai café for coffee. When Kyaw and Hnin visit they bring with them a fistful of stories and photographs that would earn them a lengthy jail sentence if they tried to publish them in Burma. Kyaw Kyaw says the daily reality for journalists is one of fear and frustration.

"Journalists want to write stories, but we know we won't be allowed to write the stories we want. We have to send it to the exiled media, and that takes time."

Hnin interrupts to explain that articles criticizing the regime or their policies risk jail for their authors.

"Local journalists send stories out to the exiled media. It then comes back inside via the BBC, DVB or VOA. Government journalists are like puppets they print what they're told to. People have no trust in the

having to always censor his own stories will eventually have on him.

"The government has turned us into liars, they have created a culture of lies, journalists have to lie, I can't tell the truth, teachers can't teach the truth, we can only talk truly and freely with people we know and trust."

Hnin concurs and says her life is full of fear and frustration as she tries to grapple with the complexities of being a journalist in a country where telling the truth is rewarded with a lengthy jail sentence - 39 media workers are currently serving time in Burmese jails.

"I want to write stories, only stories, but I have to be afraid of strangers, I have become fearful. When I interview people I'm scared. I worry they might inform on me. I want to use my training in my country, but it's so hard. I never thought it would be so painful."

Phil Thornton lives and works as a journalist on the Thai Burma border and is the author of Restless Souls: rebels, refugees, medics and misfits on the Thai Burma border.



Karenni journalists based on the Thai-Burma border clandestinely gather news on last November's general election. Photo: Tee Reh



Crisis? What Crisis?

IT'S BEEN CALLED ASIA'S 'HIDDEN DARFUR' BUT THE SUFFERING IN EASTERN BURMA SEEMS LITTLE KNOWN AROUND THE WORLD. WHY HAS THE THAI AND REGIONAL MEDIA FAILED TO PROPERLY DOCUMENT THIS LONG-RUNNING HUMANITARIAN DRAMA? WHAT CAN BE DONE TO BREAK THE DEADLOCK? BY JIM POLLARD



A soldier with the Shan State Army South ethnic resistance stands looking over Shan State. Photo: Nic Dunlop

AUNG San Suu Kyi has been freed. Burma has a new president. But the junta remains. The generals are fulfilling their "Democracy Road-Map" – an act of window-dressing that suggests change and hope for a better future.

The grim realities on the ground are unchanged: an estimated 2,200 political prisoners still in custody, while millions continue to flee and live work abroad.

In Karen and Shan states the long-run humanitarian crisis drags on. On

the border it's a mess. There are fears the low-scale civil war will intensify. Governors in Tak and adjacent provinces have a list of areas prepared for a range of scenarios including the possible influx of tens of thousands of refugees.

Consider, for a moment, the turmoil that people in eastern Burma have endured:

- More than 3,600 civilian settlements forcibly relocated or abandoned over the past 14 years.
- Half a million people internally displaced.

- 140,000 refugees in nine camps along the border, from Kanchanaburi all the way up to Mae Hong Son.

These figures come from the Thailand Burma Border Consortium – a group of non-government organizations and international church groups – that has provided food and shelter to the camps since 1984. As well as raising millions – more than US\$30m last year – to buy the rice and other staples the refugees survive on, TBBC has been documenting the ethnic strife in eastern Burma.

The group's recent report on 'Protracted displacement and Chronic Poverty in Eastern Burma' indicates serious impoverishment stemming from years of militarization and displacement. This story is not new, but it's one that hasn't got better. In the year to July 2010, an estimated 73,000 people were forced to leave their homes, TBBC noted.

In-depth surveys in recent years overseen by respected international academics have shown that eastern Burma has child and infant death rates worse than major trouble-spots in Africa. Yet it seems like an invisible humanitarian shambles as Southeast Asia strives to forge ahead, with its new Burmese Parliament and moves toward regional integration. An Asean Economic Community is supposedly just four years down the road.

The list of abuses is long and disturbing – from institutionalized rape of ethnic women to the slaughter of villagers. Half of this tragedy is the fact it's so appallingly under-reported, which raises questions as to why. It's got to the point where fighting, killings, bomb attacks and mayhem in villages an hour or two across the border go almost completely undocumented.

The Thai media and ordinary people just got tired of the civil war in Burma, because it's dragged on for so long – six decades.

The bitter truth is Thailand has a disturbing array of problems of its own – thousands killed in an ugly insurgency in the far South that sees bombings and brutal slayings on a daily basis; hundreds of MPs banned from a political system that's become divided and poisonous; endemic corruption; never-ending drug problems (closely linked to the crisis in Shan State); millions of illegal migrant workers flooding in from all sides; one of the world's worst levels of wealth disparity; rampant teenage pregnancies; an underpaid and highly politicized police force; an ailing elderly monarch, fears about succession; and rumours of another coup.

These are reasons why the Thai media and populace at large have drifted away from 'Channel Burma'. The carnage in Rangoon – the 1988 uprising – was 23 years ago and they've lost interest in the generals'

dirty work. It's like a record that never stops and the song is so bad they can't bear to listen. It's not good for tourism. Let's watch the football in England.

Kavi Chittavongkorn, a columnist on *The Nation*, says the Thai media and ordinary people just got tired of the civil war in Burma, because it's dragged on for so long – six decades. "It's such a long-running problem, Thais are tired of hearing about it," he said during a recent chat in our office. "And all the old figures from those days [the KNU's General Bo Mya, secretary-general Padoh Manh Shah], they have all died. Also, the Karen have the problem of statelessness on both sides of the border."

The Thai media has struggled on a number of fronts – the advent of the internet has undermined sales and advertising revenue. The news cycle has sped up; updates are posted hourly but staff downsizing has



Three young men about to enter the monkhood sit on an elephant in a procession in Thaton, Mon State. Photo: Nic Dunlop



meant a greater domestic focus and less reporting on more long-term concerns. The big regional issues are losing out.

There are also fundamental issues. After more than a decade on one daily paper in Bangkok, I've come to feel that while Thais are gracious hosts, gentle socially and often fun-loving, their easy-going nature isn't suited to hard-news reporting about harsh realities. Aside from the very real dangers of taking on the powerful, the revealing of ugly truths is a constant struggle because their respect for elders (*krieng jai*) limits their questioning of often appallingly corrupt politicians and wealthy business leaders, who come across as greedy and self-obsessed. The notion of 'face' hinders naming and shaming, exposing the warts in plain view; army chiefs who launched coup attempts are shuffled off

to the side, while the justice system grinds away so slowly evil deeds slip from memory into the distant past.

One doesn't have to look far to recall a litany of outrages that escaped proper resolution: May 1992, the 'Suphan Buri six', the Kadar fire, the Twenty Pub shooting, Thaksin's corruption trial, the notorious 'War against drugs' when police hit teams gunned down more than 2,500 alleged drug dealers just eight years ago. So, when containers 'full of skeletons' were reported off the coast of Sattahip in May 2009, it was treated very seriously, because, well, it's possible. ('Black May', 1992; they always wondered where the bodies went). Crime is deliberately and systematically downplayed by the English-language press, as are business scandals; it could undermine faith in

'the system', hurt the economy. One only has to compare the front pages of Thai-language papers to *The Nation* and *Bangkok Post* to see that very plainly. For staff of foreign embassies in Bangkok who deal with the police when their nationals are robbed, raped or killed, it's seen as something of a joke; almost like a news laundering process, the wholesale sweeping of murder and mayhem under the rug; a sanitized version of news for international consumption. Ten people sentenced to death for drug dealing: big story? No, we (*The Nation*) ran it as a four-par filler; lead report in the briefs column on page four.

To be fair, the Thai media has had their hands full reporting on this profusion of problems at home. For a Western journalist or subeditor, the depth, variety and constant tide of drama never ceases to amaze – even when we rarely get into crime. The night after Pope John Paul II died we had to change the front page after news came from the south – people killed by bombs in Hat Yai. My colleague Chris Burslem, who has worked here years longer, just smirked. "I knew that would happen."

From early 2001, editors and media outlets also had to outwit and endure a withering assault by Thaksin Shinawatra, who set out relentlessly to subdue them; buy them, intimidate them, shut them down.

These are some of the reasons why so little reporting was done on the strife in eastern Burma over the past decade. It partly explains why Than Shwe's junta, has got off lightly in the international arena, with China vetoing any credible UN action and ASEAN its usual hopeless self. Only in the last few years has Burma's exile media risen to properly fill the gap, with US and western support (which now appears to be waning). *Irrawaddy*, *DVB* and others are now mandatory for Burma watchers.

Aussie newspaper man Ross Dunkley has had an ugly taste of Burmese justice. But for the 'little people' in Burma's eastern states, it's the rule of the gun. Burmese Karen have been fleeing to Thailand for a quarter of a century; they at least have the camps as some kind of sanctuary. Tens of thousands of Shan, who fled gross abuses in their home state, particularly during

1996–98, have had to live illegally on farms or worksites throughout the North, as they have only unofficial makeshift camps not formally acknowledged by Thailand.

The nine official border camps are a microcosm of diversity these days, with Karenni, Kachin, Chin, Muslims from Arakan (Rakhine) State, Rohingya, as well as army deserters, Cyclone Nargis survivors and even a few wealthy Burmese seeking to buy a new life in the West. They would be far more crowded – and surely mired in social trauma – if the government of George W Bush had not opened its doors and allowed a huge number of refugees to resettle in the US. About 70,000 have left – to try to start new lives in America, Canada, Europe, Scandinavia, Australia and other parts – over the past five to six years.

TBBC executive director Jack Dunford and others such as American anthropologist Christina Fink, author of the well-regarded 'Living Silence in Burma', have noted that the Thai policy of keeping the camps off-limits to the media is another factor that suppressed reporting about the situation on the border.

TBBC attempted to surmount this lack of information about the camps by publishing 'Night Thousand Nights' last year, a "scrapbook" of photos and memories from refugees and aid workers in the camps over the past 25 years. The book is superb, full of heartbreaking letters from refugees about the traumas they encountered in Burma and their lives in the camps since then. It gives very moving insights into the suffering of the Karen, in particular.

Speaking at the launch of the book at the FCCT late 2010, Dunford admitted to feelings of "despair balanced with hope" as he wondered how brutal military attacks on innocent villages "could happen for decades, with impunity – and how many more years could this go on for?"

The Englishman said he was mystified at the lack of international empathy about what's happening in Karen State. "Somehow there's a disconnect between what happens in these remote areas and the Saffron Revolution," he said, referring to the 2007 uprising led by monks in Rangoon. "It gripped the entire world's attention," he

"Aid workers call the regime's campaign against the Karen rebellion 'the hidden Darfur'." – Denis Gray



Internally displaced people rest in the jungle in eastern Karen State. Photo: Phil Thornton



Displaced Karen villagers get treated at a makeshift clinic on the Burma border. Photo: Phil Thornton

said, but the Burmese army's violence "is happening every day in the border area" and goes almost wholly ignored".

Denis Gray is one veteran correspondent who has acknowledged the scale of the tragedy in eastern Burma. He wrote a report for Associated Press from the Mae Rama Luang camp last August that said: "Aid workers call the regime's campaign against the Karen rebellion 'the hidden Darfur'."

Australian author and journalist Phil Thornton is another who has focused on eastern Burma, naturally perhaps as he's based in Mae Sot. Thornton said the arrest in January of a foreign and several Burmese cameramen seeking to film fighting across the border showed how difficult it is to cover the low-conflict.

"I think journos find it a hard bubble to penetrate. They usually look for conflict between the armed groups, but that's low-level. And a lot of the conflict is against civilians, who are the regime's real target. The big story is the half a million displaced and the two million flooding over the border looking for work – these people can't afford to live

in their own country," he said. "There's also the deplorable health status of the country, the schools in Karen State, the landmines, the atrocity demining [forcing prisoners or villagers to walk ahead of troops in areas where there are mines], the oil and gas revenue – for me, these are all big stories. IDPs [internally displaced people] themselves are a huge story – how they find the will to resist the massive Burmese military machine.

"But it does take time. Part of the trouble is magazines don't encourage journalists to look deeply into stories these days – it's the cost and often the people back at media outlets don't know the story. I'm fortunate in that I live here, but you can't put all the blame on the journos. You need at least a week ... and they need to research for a few days before they come up [to the border].

"It is well documented that this is one of the worst regimes in the world – and some regional newspapers think they can cover these stories via the use of a low-paid stringer. News outlets in the region, especially those countries that border Burma need to understand what's happening on

their doorstep and inform their citizens. Burma is a huge international story; refugees, economic and illegal migrants, drugs, disease and trade makes it so. Whichever way you look at it, it's a huge story – health, the humanitarian situation, trade – potentially it's a massive story. It's also an ongoing story that is ever changing."

On November 8 last year, the day after the junta's contentious election, people were reminded of the grim realities in eastern Burma when a wave of 20,000 refugees fled over the border to Mae Sot after clashes erupted in Myawaddy. Rebels from a formerly pro-junta militia swapped sides and occupied the border town on polling day, until they were attacked and dispersed by Burmese troops. The incident was significant in highlighting that the underlying causes of Burma's ethnic divide simply haven't been addressed. The military regime has made little or no effort to accommodate ethnic groups' deep-rooted concerns.

Even now, with the new Parliament convened, there is little sign about how the regime will deal with the "ethnic question". A senior UN official who briefed reporters in Bangkok in early February said while there had been a report of clashes in Kachin State in the far north, it was unclear if the junta would try to use force to coerce "rebel"



ethnic groups to be part of its controversial Border Guard Force plan – or whether they may seek to utilize some of the political capital they reaped from staging the election.

"We don't know how they'll act on the newfound legitimacy they have – whether they will go for the Sri Lankan solution [ie. annihilation of their rivals] or a more negotiated change," the official said, at the off-the-record briefing.

One of the problems on the Thai-Burma border, he said, was it had not "progressed" or evolved like the China-Burma border, where humanitarian work had the blessing of both sides. On the Thai-Burma border humanitarian work was "seen as an aid extension of the KNU [Karen National Union] and other armed ethnic groups – it's rooted in a situation 20 years old". The armed groups were now small, guerilla outfits largely, but the overall humanitarian situation had not improved.

American author Mac McClelland compared the suffering in eastern Burma to the "genocide" in Darfur in her book 'For Us Surrender Is Out Of The Question', noting that the mortality rate of children under five was double that recorded in Sudan. Systematic rape – as documented by SWAN and other groups – has been linked to claims the regime has sought to dilute ethnic



Two days of walk from help. Photo: Phil Thornton

bloodlines. Special rapporteurs appointed by the United Nations have also said that years of ongoing violence and destruction of villages appears to be "the result of policy at the highest level"; SPDC troops are still chasing displaced Karen and Shan from their villages and destroying all their food and livestock. Other factors giving weight to charges of ethnic cleansing include the disallowing of Karen language instruction. In both Karen and Shan states, Burmese

troops have been accused of leaving messages that suggest they want to kill all Karen and Shan – "absorb all racial groups who are not Burman".

In a world distracted by a mass of other concerns, the scale of Burma's suffering has yet to register strongly, or gain the sort of momentum that might convince the United Nations to act. Jody Williams, the American activist who shared the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for the global anti-landmine campaign, is one key figure who has spoken out on Burma many times. Actress Mia Farrow is another who has visited the camps on the Thai-Burma border in recent years. Sadly, however, their lobbying has been less effective, than, say, George Clooney, the Hollywood actor who has managed to put the spotlight on Darfur and the Sudan through his passion, charm or sheer "star power".

Burma needs a Bono. It probably also needs new strategies. The senior UN official believed Suu Kyi needs to split with the "uncles" in her party, the NLD, and suspend the call on sanctions, even if it's only for a year – "put the ball back in the junta's court and force them to respond". It might also require threats of global bans against China, for its continued opposition to a Commission of Inquiry – into grave human rights concerns by the junta – by the UN. That is seen as one way to blow away the deadlock and get some serious change happening.



The Jungle School. Photo: Phil Thornton

"Somehow there's a disconnect between what happens in the remote areas and the Saffron Revolution." – Jack Dunford, TBBC

☛ *The Guardian* is fondly known as *The Grauniad* on account of having more typographicals per column inch than even *Dateline Bangkok*. The famous London newspaper recently ran a memorable comment piece: 'The foreign correspondent is dead. Long live the foreign correspondent.' Its author, **Timothy Garton Ash**, recalled nostalgically his coverage of Kosovo in 1999.

"This trip was expensive," he wrote. "As most foreign correspondents did, I used a fixer, a local journalist who sets up appointments, makes travel arrangements and gives local background, and an interpreter. A newspaper paid. I learned the kinds of thing that you can only learn by being on the spot. And I was not alone. Some 2,700 media people went into Kosovo with or immediately after the invading/liberating forces: roughly one journalist for every 800 inhabitants."

"A decade later, how many would there be? At such a big, dramatic and warlike moment, probably still quite a lot. (If it bleeds, it leads.) But as a general rule, and even for very important countries and stories: fewer, ever fewer. The foreign correspondent, a type incomparably satirised by **Evelyn Waugh** in his novel *Scoop*, and celebrated by Alfred Hitchcock in his film *Foreign Correspondent*, is an endangered species. Only a few major news organisations, such as the *BBC* and *The New York Times*, still have worldwide networks of resident correspondents, in what are traditionally called foreign bureaux (or bureaus, according to taste).

"There is absolutely no point in sitting around moaning about this, over many a whisky in a now deserted press bar. Rather, we need to establish how what was of real value in the work of the 20th-century foreign correspondent can be preserved, and how we can use some wonderful new opportunities that did not exist in the age of the telegraph and telex. This is what the former director of global news at the *BBC*, **Richard Sambrook**, attempts to do in a new, closely researched analysis for the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, titled 'Are Foreign Correspondents Redundant?' He quotes one American television producer saying that to hark back to the traditional foreign bureaux is like asking 'why don't we still use clay tablets?'"

"The de luxe life satirised in Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* has gone for good, but we can still preserve the best of a necessary craft," argues Garton Ash. His thoughtful piece makes particularly good reading in Bangkok which has

seen its foreign correspondent corps slashed to the bone in the past decade, and budgets repeatedly cut.

Modern consumers of news expect it to come virtually free over the internet or satellites, and don't hesitate to complain bitterly about the quality of something they often haven't even paid for. They seem to mistake news, which is a commodity, for some sort of human right. Many of the advertising-based business models that used to underwrite the old print and mass media vehicles have collapsed, and the new ones being bravely pioneered by the likes of **Rupert Murdoch** have yet to gain traction. Foreign correspondents are probably not redundant, but they are certainly out of business for the timebeing.

☛ And in all this, the recent view from Bangkok has been instructive. With some welcome support from the Canadian Embassy, the FCCT threw its doors open one weekend in November to try and bring some semblance of normality to coverage of Myanmar's rigged, unhappy and long overdue general election. With a visa ban in place for any veteran Myanmar watcher or known journalist, there were probably more foreign correspondents on the ground in the clubhouse networking and working the feeds than in Myanmar itself. The few inside the country were operating incognito — much as journalists have had to do there for the past half century. If Kosovo was blessed with one foreign journalist to every 800 inhabitants in 1999, Myanmar was lucky if it had one for every three million in 2010. Many Burmese journalists nevertheless did valiant work under the circumstances.

☛ If the Burmese would have appreciated more exposure of the patently undemocratic processes under way last year, plenty of Thais would have appreciated less attention being paid to their undemocratic habits — habits which stretch right across the Land of Smiles' colour-coded political spectrum. Hordes of foreign media poured into Bangkok in April and May, and it must be said the deaths of two went pretty much unmourned by locals in the larger picture of political mayhem. Journalists who put themselves in harm's way should always remember that no story is worth getting killed for — dead journalists don't file. Traditional foreign correspondents are meant to go into god-forsaken places and get the story. They are also meant to come out afterwards — which is why many confirm their bookings or escape route out of a hotspot before getting down to any actual reporting. Being able to file on time

and leave at will are major achievements from media unfriendly datelines like Rangoon, Lhasa, Pyongyang or Harare, and are high among the reasons to conceal being on assignment.

☛ In Thailand, however, some visiting journalists find themselves in exactly the opposite situation. In a recent rather odd contribution to *The Spectator*, Aidan Hartley noted: "Out on the streets of Bangkok, though, the pressure is pretty intense. I am glad we clearly stood out as journalists, rather than sex tourists. I mean, Matt the producer held a big camera and I was rigged up with a microphone. This kit separated us from the hordes of Western men my age stalking around with much younger Thai women. Except, that is, when we had arranged a secret rendezvous with a source in a hotel room that we rented by the hour, and went up to prepare with an earnest local female journalist. 'Yes, you have nice time,' nodded the receptionists with knowing smiles. All three of us were blushing deeply. We knew we were conducting an interview about human rights for British television, but everybody else thought we were making a cheap pornographic film."

☛ Such concerns were probably not uppermost when the Office of the Prime Minister sent out a note last year concerning the "Truth for National Reconciliation." Essentially, it was a request for some tip-offs on what had actually transpired in April and May, and nobody could have accused the government of beating around the bush: "There have been lingering questions and doubts in the minds of Thai people and among the international community about the truth surrounding these events." Good start. The SOP from here on in to set up a committee or commission of inquiry, which proceeds to bumble around for as long as it takes anybody remotely interested in the topic to die off. Since this can take some time, the chair and commissioners are locked in place for the duration — unless they retire, die, resign, are judged bankrupt, declared "incompetent or quasi-incompetent," or "sentenced by a final judgment to be imprisoned." It should be relatively easy to agree on whether or not a commissioner is dead or in jail. The issue of quasi-competence, however, raises some important questions about acceptable levels of incompetence.

☛ Official quasi-incompetence may have been on display in September when the anniversary of the 2006 coup loomed, the emergency decree was due for an extension, and red-shirted folk were planning yet another little rally. Deputy Prime

Minister Suthep Thaugsuban was fretting openly over plots to assassinate his boss and other leading political figures. Not everybody was quite as convinced that something so evil was afoot. That was until a suspicious man in black was arrested staking out a condominium near the prime minister's residence. Reports that the suspect might be part of an assassination plot quickly circulated. The good news was that it didn't require any waterboarding at all to establish that the apprehended villain was in fact a member of the prime minister's own security detail. And, no doubt, they all lived happily ever after.

☛ Foreign correspondents, parachute journalists, visiting firemen, superstringers — depending on your perspective, these are experienced operators who can cut dispassionately to the heart of a story that may be beyond the reach of locals for whatever reason (pestilence, disaster, corruption, death squads, lunch hour, etc.), or uninformed interlopers who apply foreign preconceptions to prevailing conditions they don't remotely understand. Those in the latter category often give themselves away by quoting a taxi driver prominently in their report — usually forgetting to mention that it is the one driving them in from the airport to the hotel. Talkative cabbies can therefore address much wider audiences than is generally recognized, even by themselves. In London taxis are black and in New York yellow. In Bangkok, all the taxis are red — even the pink and green ones. So too are the motorcycle taxi drivers in orange. Taxis circulate the City of Angels tuned to radio stations discussing the latest Wikileaks on Thailand and other topics that seldom get an airing in the mainstream media. Their drivers spend a lot of time listening to the radio and shaving with tweezers at red lights. If this makes them more politically aware than in most capitals, this should be a boon for visiting reporters. It is certainly a disaster for residents who don't share their political complexion, particularly those who speak too much of the vernacular. Academics and journalists deemed too yellow, have been turned out, splashed with puddles or left standing on the curb. Irrespective of their politics, the ambient demeanour of Bangkok taxi drivers is increasingly rude and cussed — often for good reason. After paying rentals and fuel, they risk going home none the richer from a day in the ever worsening traffic, listening to the radio and running out of stubble to tweeze. Bangkok is the easiest city in the world to hail a taxi for the simple reason that there are far too many taxis on the streets hopelessly lost and causing traffic jams — and they are all making far too little. Indeed, Thai

cabbies actually have much more in common with journalists than they know. And a lot of journalists may be working as cabbies soon.

☛ Whatever the editor claims, the Bangkok Post surely didn't cut all those sections to improve its editorial profile. That would be akin to cutting your head off for a change of hairdo. Presumably, among other things, saving money figured somewhere in the rationale. At least the comics' section won a partial reprieve after a public uproar that included a judicious epistle from FCCT board member **Justin Moseley** at his most outraged and terrifying. A piece of advice in this regard: never go there.

☛ Speaking of frightening things in the Bangkok Post, military affairs correspondent Wassana Nanuam reported in all seriousness last year: "It is estimated there are about 400 generals — from the rank of major-general up — who have been 'pickled' in the army's vast vat of inactive positions because they are believed to have red (anti-government) links or leanings." As with those millions of elephants in Laos, Thailand has always been particularly richly endowed with generals. Indeed, during a golf course boom twenty years ago, an *Asiaweek* correspondent calculated that it was possible to have a general positioned after every third hole on all the courses in the land. Sceptics said this was absolute nonsense — unless admirals and air marshals were enlisted to mark the 18th holes.

☛ Every journalist knows the misery of having one's byline mauled by careless subbing. It even happens at the *Financial Times*. **Tim Johnston** recently filed a piece from Bangkok, 'Thai-Burma port deal: great for trade, bad for reform,' which arguably changed the regional map: "Logistically, south-east Asia is a nightmare," began the piece, prophetically. "Until last year, if you wanted to get a container of goods from Bangkok to Hanoi you would have had to use three different trucks go get it there, one for Thailand, one for Cambodia and one for Vietnam. But that is changing. Abhisit Vejjajiva, Thailand's prime minister, signed a deal on Monday to build a port on the coast of neighbouring Burma, part of a much larger region-wide infrastructure programme which includes massive investments in the rail network, largely funded by China." It has to be said that this an odd sort of progress. Sending a container of goods from Bangkok to Hanoi via Burma still involves at least three trucks plus an incredibly long sea voyage through the choked-up Straits of Malacca and other pirate-infested waters. And, as Tim so

rightly pointed out, there are also some important geopolitical considerations: "The port deal will also underline just how ineffective international sanctions against the Burmese regime are. Thailand is America's oldest ally in Asia, and if Washington cannot persuade the Thai government to limit its involvement with the generals who run Burma, there is little hope that the regime's other major supporters — China and India — will fall into line." Actually, it probably won't make that much difference if everybody is bumbling around the region hopelessly lost. Still, one more reason to keep all those Cambodian truckers sweet until the Chinese get their railways built.

☛ With over 16,000 copies in print in three hardback editions, the FCCT's *The King of Thailand in World Focus* was recently published in a reduced format paperback version. The 20,000 softbacks are aimed primarily at schools and universities in Thailand with a 300 baht cover price to match. The hardbacks have meanwhile found their way all over the world, including Poland where a bookshop's machine translations of the original blurb produced a complimentary, but nevertheless rather extraordinary, result: "*The King of Thailand in World Focus: Articles and images from the international press 1946-2006* is a spatiotemporal profit of the world's provident regnant being danaus plexippus viewed finished the sagaciousness of overseas media: newspapers, magazines, finishing line service and photographers. This is too a glimpse into the personation of the king during critical analysis moments in the country's semipolitical yore. He maybe one of the last monarchs in the world to have got concrete semipolitical persuade, and signally, he does and so not finished the storm of collection, merely finished the marvelous confide and tenderness of his kinfolk ... This unprecedented, updated variation, publicised in union with the King's 80th natal day, documents in any item the provocative history ... from his comparatively unworried youth exhausted over the sea, to drama and unexpected arena, finished his twelvemonth amidst home-style and territorial sturm und drang, into his state equally a exponent of the have-nots and a king over-much beloved and beloved aside his kinfolk."

Remember, you read it here first

Rapid Relief

Veteran photojournalist *Tony Cliff* explains why he chose this picture of the Free Burma Rangers at work in Karen State



I have taken scores of dental treatment pictures during my trips in Burma ethnic territories with the relief group Free Burma Rangers. I could fill a special issue of the "Dentist magazine" or the "Popular tooth". Still, beyond obvious aesthetic reasons (the light, the characters' attitude, its easy readability), I have a weakness for this one. It's a classic illustration of the juxtaposition of two components, here the tooth pulling and the jungle decor, rarely if ever observed in a same scene.

I also like the picture for what it does not show, the smile of the woman, who after suffering a few minutes, made me understand that her life, thanks to that simple and quick operation, would considerably improve. Somebody told me he likes the picture "because for once it shows something positive from a sad situation". That's another way to put it.



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