

# Kachin by DIM LIGHT

La Hkawng, who teaches Chinese, is concerned about the influence of Kachin's giant neighbour.



Shan Un La Hkum joined the Kachin Independence Army to push back Myanmar's abuse-prone military.

## SQUEEZED BETWEEN MYANMAR'S INVASIVE ARMY AND A HARDENING CHINESE BORDER, FREEDOM FIGHTERS PUSH FOR RIGHTS PROMISED LONG AGO

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MYANMAR'S northernmost Kachin state features impassable, impossibly beautiful Himalayan topography along its border with Tibet, the once-sovereign nation annexed by China. On the southeastern frontier lies Yunnan, never in question as a Chinese province. Lately, the Kachin ethnic minority is feeling even more hemmed in.

A source with the Kachin Independence Organisation (KIO) says China has recently stepped up patrols and has destroyed bridges spanning the river that marks the border with Yunnan.

The effect has been to seal off many informal passes that serve as essential lifelines between the populations, and increasing isolation for the section of the state controlled by the KIO, a move that serves the dark intentions of the army of Myanmar.

Taking rough roads and fording the river in mid-April with a few Free Burma Rangers – an advocacy group working to expose army abuses and provide humanitarian assistance to displaced persons – it becomes clear that the passage remains possible only for those willing and able to persevere.

Promised “full autonomy” 72 years ago under the Panglong Agreement championed by Burmese hero Aung San shortly after colonial Britain left the country, the Kachin have been fighting the army since June 9, 2011, after the breakdown of a 17-year ceasefire.

The election of Aung San's daughter, Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, did nothing to curb army aggression against ethnic minorities who form more than 30 per cent of Myanmar's population. The Rohingyas, Shan, Karen, Karenni and Kachin often find their ways of life and cultural freedom under threat and their personal safety imperilled.

Education is the chief focus in the KIO-administered border town of Mai Ja Yang, a name that translates as “Beautiful, Bountiful Fields”. It's full of learning institutions and offers job training for war victims. The language, history and culture of the Kachin flourish in ways not allowed elsewhere in the state where the central government has control.

### The Soldier

A Kachin Independence Army (KIA) patrol riding in the back of a pickup passes a lorry rumbling in the opposite direction loaded with fresh-cut sugarcane for markets in Yunnan.

The cane has been harvested by Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), as designated by the United Nations. There are about 3,000 of them living in the Pa Kahatawng IDP Camp alongside more than 120,000 other people whose homes the army has destroyed since 2011.

At the KIA base, a soldier proclaims, “I stand with my people.” Unlike recruits from IDP backgrounds, Shan Un La Hkum left his native Momauk township, in a government-controlled area, fully intending to enlist.

“We Kachin have our own language



Mary Tawm helps provide Kachin victims of war with survival skills, necessities and inspiration through the People's Light, a local civic group.

and cultural and religious traditions. But if we have no army when threatened, we have no means of defending ourselves. Our homeland and would be at the mercy of the aggressors.”

His mother died when he was six. His father served the KIA for 17 years. La Hkum joined the militia in 2011. “My father shared countless stories of the frontline. My deepest desire in joining the army was to help my brothers and sisters.

“If you speak Jinghpaw, the Kachin language, when you enter a shop in a government-controlled area, you may be asked ‘What's your religion?’ or ‘Where are you from?’ When they find out you're Kachin, you might be told to leave, that your presence is not desirable. There is a lack of respect for Kachin even in their own homeland.”

La Hkum, a Baptist, misses the festivities of his youth in mainly Christian Kachin. “In my hometown we held big manao dances for Christmas, New Year's and other big celebrations. The government always wants Kachin to perform our traditional dances to give the appearance that we're happy, but we dance on our own terms.”

### The IDP

Lulu Maran, 19, whose first name means “second sister”, explains how she and her family have reluctantly begun to accept the changes in their lives. Since last visited by *The Nation* three years ago, her elder sister has married and moved out of the IDP camp and Lulu has assumed her duties.

Six of the seven siblings and their parents remain, still recalling their lives as farmers in Sin Lum, the village from which the army drove them in 2011. Kachin is home to abundant timber, rare-earth minerals and the world's largest jade deposits, most of it tapped for the insatiable Chinese market.

“My mother and I visit now and then, but just long enough to take what



KIA squads, bulldozers and trucks loaded with sugarcane headed for China ply the road in and out of Mai Ja Yang.

we can from the fruit trees or what's growing wild in the abandoned fields,” says Lulu. “My youngest sister has no memory of the life we once lived.”

In “The Hidden War”, a report on the findings of a study funded by humanitarian groups and the European Union, among others, the main reasons IDPs long to return home are listed.

“The lack of livelihood opportunities, the camps' undignified living conditions, the experience of being belittled in the camp, and fear of losing their houses and land in their home villages,” says the report issued this year. “The majority of IDPs are not confident about recovering their rights or being able to express their identity, political thoughts or participate in social life.”

Most of their former houses were destroyed, their land is overgrown and their livestock is lost or stolen.

In an initiative begun a couple of years ago, the government annual gives pigs to about five families in the camp to raise and sell for extra money. But there are about 60 families in the camp, Lulu says, so the official “largesse” is stretched thin.

“There are eight of us living under the same roof,” she says. “I'd like to work in a hospital to make money – even in the Burmese-controlled area if necessary, although it's a lot more tense there. But my sister says she has met some good people and made a few close Burmese friends. We are

Catholics, and so are some members of the Burmese military who she has befriended.”

Across the road from the camp stands a church, newly built by a Chinese Catholic pastor for the IDPs. This is where the Maran family worships.

Lulu says finding jobs on the Chinese side would be difficult since no one in the family speaks Chinese.

“For now I will work in the sugarcane fields when we need extra money. I need to help my parents – they gave so much to all their children.”

### The Teacher

La Hkawng, an ethnic Kachin who teaches Chinese at Mai Ja Yang's PKDS School, sums up Kachin-Chinese interactions in this hard-to-reach corner of Myanmar. “It's an economic relationship.”

While grateful for the steady work he has as a teacher and proprietor of a small computer shop, he is concerned about China's growing influence in Kachin.

“I have a lot of Chinese friends,” says La Hkawng, who migrated here from Muse in northern Shan State, “and yet we do not really connect. They value business. Kachin and Shan have more of an interest in their traditional cultures.”

In 2010 he worked for a Chinese firm seeking approval for the controversial Myitsone Dam – unsuccessfully, as it turned out in 2017. “There has



Lulu Maran, an IDP filled with dreams deferred.



Children play in the late afternoon in the Pa Kahatawng IDP Camp alongside the Chinese border.

state, operates the Cheju restaurant and resort. It sells products made by the IDPs she teaches, among them schoolbags, pillowcases, purses, dresses and sarongs.

Cheju translates as “Grace” or “Thanks” in Jinghpaw. The young IDPs learn to take food orders in English and can prepare a few foreign dishes, including a smooth espresso.

“One of our students recently returned from training in Yangon with a renowned Italian barista,” says Tawm, who is also co-founder and executive director of WPN, or Wunpawng Ninghtoi (the People's Light).

“We provide alternative opportunities for IDP children who drop out of school and need practical job skills. We believe it's our role to show people the light in the dark.”

WPN was one of a handful of groups including the Catholic and Baptist churches and local NGOs represented on a strategy team providing humanitarian assistance to people affected by armed conflict in Kachin and northern Shan that helped produce the “Hidden War” report.

Covering lesser-known aspects of what has been called the world's longest civil war, the report says the “intensive war” was now directed against IDPs in Kachin and northern Shan.

“This is taking place by the impoverishment imposed on them, through the reduced food supply and basic services.” In KIO-controlled areas, “rice, edible oil, salt and beans are not permitted to enter through China, which is causing food shortages,” it says.

Tawm is leery of both the government's true intentions – including the most recent ceasefire unilaterally imposed by Yangon – and of the ever-increasing Chinese influence, which she calls largely exploitative and overly reliant on monoculture, particularly sugarcane and bananas.

“The central government exhibits a lack of respect for the minority cultures,” she says. “Burma isn't a functional federation. We just want respect and fair treatment. Many of the Kachin and Shan IDPs have been here since 2011. The youth have lost out a lot on formal education since then.”

“The IDPs are effectively trapped. Most of them really want to get back to their homes. But without genuine peace, the situation will remain tense.”

She's glad to be living in the Kachin-controlled region, where she can speak Jinghpaw freely and worship more freely. “We are approaching the eighth anniversary of the resumption of war on June 9, a day that has become another important day on the Kachin calendar, and on which we will say many prayers.”

Parts of Kachin state seem blanketed in perpetual Christmas. It's not uncommon to see Mai Ja Yang storefronts and homes decorated with Santas and snowmen.

Dawn unveils a desolate, snowy landscape around Hkakabo Razi and Gamlang Razi, the highest peaks in Southeast Asia, at the gateway to the roof of the world. Looming over a war largely ignored by the outside world, they stand witness to the sacrifices of a people fervently hoping for new signs of light.

### The Humanitarian

A few days before Easter, Mary Tawm, a Kachin from northern Shan