VOICES OF THE DISPLACED
AUTUMN 2017
“They beat and killed my husband with a knife,” a 25-year-old woman told investigators, describing how five soldiers then raped her and killed her 8-month-old son, who was crying. “To silence him, they killed him, too, with a knife.”

The devastating report this quote was pulled from went public on February 3, 2017. United Nations human rights workers interviewed 204 survivors from recent violence in West Myanmar who fled across the Naf river seeking refuge in Bangladesh.

That 25-year-old woman is real. Our team met many women like her and heard their stories. According to Jesus, she is also our neighbour. And because He told us to love our neighbours as ourselves, what I want for my own daughters I also want for that woman who has suffered beyond imagining.

The people being deliberately and systematically targeted by State authorities in Western Myanmar are the same ones our team works to save. In Rakhine State our team takes tremendous risks to continue delivering food that your donations purchased, for people you will never meet, who would slowly starve to death without us working together to save them.

Fortify Rights has documented the steady wheels of genocide that are rolling over this entire race of beautiful people.

As the wheels turn, there is a dedicated body of people who keep reaching out, praying, giving money, and doing so many creative interventions for the victims, and that Body is you. Because you understand that to love is to act, you consistently dig deep and reach out and love big, and we couldn’t be more grateful.

This magazine is published as an ongoing labour of love to let you in on the back story. We want you to meet the people your compassion touches: from the ethnic states in Myanmar to the border areas of Thailand: this is where you are. Where politics and violence attempt to halt the hand of compassion, that’s where you show up and embody very, very Good News.

That’s what you are. To us, to them, to the world. Thank you.

STEVE GUMAER
President, Partners Relief & Development
In 1985 a young pastor was just starting out in ministry in his home village in Karen State. Because he was a Karen Christian pastor, he was considered a target by the military, who regularly raided his village claiming they were looking for rebels and ethnic opposition supporters. This pastor soon found himself homeless inside his own country, always running for safety. He lived like this for a few years until he fled across the border to Thailand and resettled in what he thought was a safe zone – a temporary resettlement camp, Baw Nah.

But the border did nothing to provide refuge or protection. The pastor was targeted for his ethnicity and for his faith. He tells us that the soldiers snuck into the camp and shot at him when he was sleeping, but “by the grace of God, the bullet missed my head and went straight through my pillow instead.” When the army burned down the refugee settlement area, the pastor fled along the Thai-Myanmar border to a new camp area, called Mae La. This is where he lives now, along with his wife and their three teenage children, all born and raised inside the camp’s borders.

This is Pastor Arthur’s and his wife Thramu Clasper’s story. We met them in their humble home next to the church where Arthur is the head pastor and where his wife teaches music. When they first arrived in the camp 23 years ago, there were only a few simple bamboo homes surrounded by corn fields and jungle. Thramu Clasper told us that in the beginning they were afraid to stay in their assigned squatter houses at night. Instead they would run into the nearby forest or hide by the road construction, seeking safety from the soldiers who would unexpectedly but regularly come and raid the resettlement area.

Still, the camp was safer than their homeland. As the camp grew and more and more ethnic Karen people resettled in the area, a large group of unaccompanied children found their way to the refugee camp. These children were seeking shelter and safety from war, but had no adults to care for them when they arrived. To meet this need, Pastor Arthur and his wife built a school dormitory where these children could live in safety, have a roof over their heads, get food in their bellies and go to school. When they started, they had 45 children in their dormitory; now, more than 90 children live and flourish there.

As the dormitory has grown, so too has the need for assistance to ensure each child receives the care they deserve. Because of your support, Partners has been establishing sustainable agricultural and animal husbandry projects to generate income that will ultimately allow the dormitory to become self-supported. For the children who help take care of these projects, it also means investing in skills that will be beneficial when they one day return to Myanmar.

Even though these children are getting an education, the challenges which remind them they are still refugees are never far away. When I asked Pastor Arthur what the biggest struggle is, he answered right away, “Equality and discrimination. All we want is for our education to be recognised the same way the Burmese schools are. Even though our children receive diplomas and complete their schooling with great marks, it’s not recognised in Myanmar or anywhere else. Our children should have the same opportunity as others, but they don’t.”

Yet this hasn’t stopped many of the students going on to complete further education, studying at Bible School and training to become school teachers themselves. The investment this inspiring couple has made in the hundreds of children they’ve provided care for has borne much fruit, giving these children hope for a better future filled with more opportunity to follow their dreams.

While the effects of a ceasefire agreement are yet to be seen, which means they are still unable to return home, Arthur speaks about the blessings in the midst of the undeserving pressure. There is resilience in his eyes and there is great hope in his words. As he takes his wife’s hand, he tells me, “You know, God always prepares a way for us. We have a community and we have friends that love us. Even though we live in a refugee camp and people call us bad names. They may call us hopeless and see us as a burden, we are still blessed. We know that our future is in God’s hands and He will prepare us for whatever lies ahead.”

Arthur and Clasper won’t give up on the children they believe they are called to care for, just as we won’t give up on this vision we share to bring freedom and fullness to children displaced by conflict.
The eyes. It’s always the eyes. Before I’ve even hit record or asked a question, the eyes fill with tears, palpable rivers of pain and hurt and confusion, ready to pour forth in defiance of the old adage that grown men don’t cry.

I don’t speak Rohingya, but I know pain when I see it. I don’t need a translator to understand that these men have been torn down to a point I can’t even fathom.

“I went to the sea to catch a fish for my family, because we had nothing in the house. When I was at the beach, villagers and police found me and beat me and took my nets.”

Muhammed talks a bit more, and I hear some details, but I’m not fully listening. I look into his crying eyes and wonder what it would take for someone to see him as an enemy: a man to be hunted down and beaten if found alone and vulnerable.

I asked the men gathered around me in this small Rohingya village outside Sittwe in Rakhine State, Myanmar, how often these attacks happen. The answer was at least 10-20 times a month, and increasing. Violence against Rohingya is on the rise due to a brutal military crackdown in response to several attacks against a military outpost by a handful of Rohingya a few months ago. It’s estimated that more than 73,000 people have been displaced over the last several months due to military action, and there have been reports of sexual assaults, village burning, and violence on a massive scale. As the men in Muhammed’s village talk, I see resignation and hopelessness in their eyes. This is just another in a long history of abuses.

But not all the eyes I looked into that day were crying. Earlier, we had visited a camp Partners has been working with for awhile now, delivering rice and cooking oil and other dry goods, as well as renting a plot of land for the growing of veggies to supplement their diets, and a well for them to draw clean water.

The eyes there were totally changed from the last time I was there a year ago, when the stress of feeding their children was carving deep worry lines into the faces of the mothers and bringing the fathers to tears. But this year, after roughly six months of regular food deliveries and support, laughing children mobbed us as soon as we arrived, and the entire atmosphere of the camp was brighter. Child malnutrition is on the decline, and parental eyes that had previously been full of worry were now more at peace.

Eye contact is hard. It cuts past the safety barriers of articles, photos, even verbal language, and exposes you to the raw feeling of the individual. And in a world with millions of refugees and displaced people, we desperately need to acknowledge that individuality, that these people are just like us in so many ways, not just overwhelming numbers. As uncomfortable as eye contact can be, it’s the best way to understand and share in someone’s story. I saw pain and tears last week in Sittwe, but I also saw the effects of our work there: peace and hope. And that’s definitely a sight for sore eyes.
In December 2016, Ja Mai heard the bombs falling again. For a week, she could hear heavy fighting on a hill not far from the displaced peoples camp that had become her home when she was first displaced five years ago. The Myanmar Army was attacking using planes and large bombs to pave the way to overrun any remaining Kachin resistance with ground troops. This time the Kachin were unable to withstand their superior numbers and firepower.

Ja Mai was attending an evening devotion at church when the first bomb hit. By now they were so used to the sounds of bombs going off that they didn’t think too much of it. Then the second bomb hit very close to the camp and everyone ran in panic. The Myanmar Army had taken the nearby Kachin outpost and began firing mortars down towards the camp. Jai Mai ran back to her home with her baby on her back. A mortar had exploded close to her home and she was terrified. She fumbled for the key to the lock but her hand was shaking so much she couldn’t get the key inside. Eventually she got the door open and grabbed the bag she had pre-packed in case she ever needed to run again. Inside were some clothes for her baby and a few essential items. She fled with everyone else along the road, carrying her baby and the small bag of belongings. They hardly risked using their flashlights, worried that they would be seen by the Myanmar Army soldiers. They hid along the side of the road. Ja Mai crouched over with the baby on her back but realised if a bomb hit her, her baby would be at risk so instead she held her baby in her arms and sheltered him with her body. Her only thought was to protect her baby.

They stayed the night there beside the road hoping that they would be safe.

Ja Mai realised that she couldn’t stay in the jungle with her young baby. It was winter in Kachin State, when temperatures in the area regularly plummet to near freezing. Instead she managed to get across the border to China where she stayed with a friend. The rest of the people in her camp were not so fortunate. They crossed the border into China but were immediately forced back across, back towards the Myanmar Army. They spent weeks in the jungle waiting to be told where they could go to find a safe place to live.

Eventually the high school children from the camp were relocated to a boarding school. As a teacher, Ja Mai was asked to move nearby the school. This is where we met her. As she shared her story with us she seemed so strong but once she finished talking she cried quietly. We prayed for her and her son and gave them some warm hats and socks knitted by supporters from around the world. A couple of days later one of our staff went to the area where many had recently been displaced and gave 4,899 kg of vegetables and meat to 2,500 people.

It breaks my heart to see a baby a few months younger than my own grow up in a place where there is no security, and lacking so many basic necessities. It was a real privilege to be able to meet Ja Mai and her son, to pray with them and help her in a small way.

We go on your behalf, and when we do this together, your love and generosity for the displaced brings hope, and helps them know that people care.
Partners started with a $30 commitment to support an orphan girl from Myanmar’s war zone. Over 22 years on, we now support thousands of people in refugee camps and displaced across Myanmar. We need your help to change the lives of even more and remind them that they are loved and not forgotten.

BECOME A CHANGEMAKER TODAY BY COMMITTING A MINIMUM OF $30 A MONTH TO SUPPORT OUR WORK WITH THE CHILDREN OF MYANMAR.

To show your support please fill in the enclosed response form and return to our office.
Free, Full Lives
for Children affected by Conflict & Oppression

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