

The People of Kachin State

Those who are fighters in the trenches, literally or otherwise, will find my report on Kachin State anywhere from mildly to wildly inaccurate and unrepresentative of the real situation there. I have never been to Kachin State, or Myanmar, or any of the surrounding countries of Southeast Asia. I have never witnessed the atrocities of the fighting men of Burma (Myanmar today). I have never experienced anything like the life-style of the mountain people struggling for their existence as a people there. I am simply an observer from afar, and apologize up front for my dependence on meager and probably inadequate sources of information.

I know also that there are the theological types who will be critical of the whole premise of persecution in Kachin because, as will be pointed out, much of what happens in Northeast Burma is political and has seemingly nothing to do with the church. They will suggest that many of the people dying there were Christians in name only.

I imagine some of that is true. I also imagine your own family has people like that, and your church and your community. But when the blood begins to spatter on the sidewalks of our towns here, it will be difficult for us to ignore the reality of the trauma that is occurring. And even if 9 out of 10 of the people falling are not your spiritual brothers, I am certain you will not be able to look on the scene without terror filling your heart, as you rush to find a way to stop the bloodbath, and to save your family and your neighbors, the rest of them.

I ask that you view Kachin State through that lens, the lens of neighbor-loving, massacre-avoidance, personal tragedy, as though it were your own person affected, and allow God to be the judge of who knew Him and who didn't. Kachin State is a horrific tragedy and needs Christian concern and it needs it today, now.

I have found in this research a mystery, a lot of history, and an opportunity for God's people to react.

I. The Mystery.

There are probably many unsolved mysteries about the Kachin. But the one that troubles me the most at this writing, is, why am I just now hearing about the Kachin people? Where have I been all this time when their history was developing? I have worked with the persecuted in one way or another for nearly 30 years. These are largely a Christian people. Why didn't I know about them?

And why has the media by and large ignored the slaughter here and in places like Nigeria, Kenya, the Philippines? Something to do with American interests not being served by helping folks that live up in the hills of a foreign country? No oil wells? No serious political ties?

Have you heard of these people? Let me share with you the little bit of information I was able to glean from the ever-present internet.

II. Some History.

A. of the Kachin people.

The Kachin people go by quite a few different names. They are called Jingpho, Singpho, Jinghpaw, and more. They live in at least 3 border nations, mainly in northeastern Burma, but also in neighboring China and India. My focus will be on those who live in Burma, or Myanmar, the modern name of that country. One million Kachin live there, as opposed to only 150,000 in China.

Who are they? The various tribal groups that make up the Kachin people do have some clear characteristics: "fierce independence, disciplined fighting skills, complex clan inter-relations, embrace of Christianity, craftsmanship, herbal healing, and jungle survival skills." (Wikipedia)

But not all who live in Kachin State (northeastern-most state of Burma) are Kachin. The territory is home also to Thai and Lao natives, Lisus, Rawangs, Nagas, and the largest ethnic group in Burma, the Burmans. Though some want to call all of these residents of the state, "Kachin", the Kachin tribe itself does not favor such a designation. That is where "Jinghpaw" comes into play. "Jinghpaw Wunpawng" means all the residents of the state, whereas Jinghpaw used alone refers only to ethnic Kachins.

Confused yet? There's more. In Kachin State people have found 2 ways to categorize the various groups. In one form, you take all the groups that have overlapping territories and similar skills, and you call them a single people. In another form, you go by language only. Very complex. And yet the Jingpo know who they are regardless of the efforts of outsiders to tell them.

Thing is, though, most of the tribes come from the same basic background, despite all the posturing and self-identifying of the groups. We'll leave it at that. Generally speaking, there's this group of people who dwell in Kachin State with similar language, ways, and even religion. We'll call them Kachins for the rest of this report.

The Kachin people can be traced back for many hundreds of years. They lived on the Tibetan plateau, perhaps in Mongolia before that, and gradually worked their way south to their present location, China's province of Yunnan, and Burma.

The Burmese government in time ceded to a number of people, including the Kachin, full autonomy in a special agreement in 1947. The State of Kachin was formed in 1948.

When Burma became independent of Great Britain, tribal conflicts of ancient nature surfaced. One serious problem was the Burman government and its attitude toward the Kachin people. When Burma declared Buddhism to be the national religion of that nation in 1961, an uprising of the Kachins which had already been in progress, escalated.

The Kachin Independence Organization with its military arm formed alliances with other independence groups through the years, but gradually the new government of Burma with its superior army was able to bring the KIO to a ceasefire. This was 1994.

While the KIA laid down its weapons, the Burmese Army continued to strengthen itself, and to this day is causing untold pain and suffering to the residents of the Kachin State. Civil War continues on and off. Serious fighting erupted in 2011 and continued into the next year. 5,580 internally displaced persons arrived at Burmese controlled camps that year. Some people leave the country altogether, never to return. But some refugees, as is the case with the refugee North Koreans, are forced by the Chinese government to go back to their homes, even though the fighting continues.

As of October, 2012, 100,000 "IDP's" were taking shelter in various camps across the State. Perhaps 1,000 died in the conflict.

China enters this sordid picture in other ways, one by deforesting portions of Kachin territory for its own purposes and people. Poverty has overcome the state, and many women and children are being forced into the sex trade of Thailand and other places. Migration of the ethnic Kachins to Thailand and Malaysia is yet another step in the undoing of this once populous territory. But not the final step. These nations often send the Kachins on to a third home in the West, in a process that can take 5-7 years.

It is not a happy thing to be a Kachin in these days.

B. A description of the Kachin State .

The Kachin economy is largely agricultural. Rice, teak, sugar cane.

But there is also mineral production: gold and jade. Unfortunately the Myanmar government cares little about the deteriorating environment in Kachin as it plunders the area to mine these resources. Erosion, flooding, and mudslides are common. Houses are destroyed each year.

Then there is China, again. One project with that nation, a 1,055 megawatt hydroelectric power plant, displaced 15,000 Kachin people. There is a systematic running over of these residents as though their worth is next to nothing. There has been little or no development in infrastructure, health care, and other basic necessities by this same government that is busy grabbing minerals from the land.

Burmese education is centered on the memorization of facts, and is located mainly in a handful of major cities. In Kachin State, with 1,700,000 people, there are 41 high schools, 86 middle, and 1183 primary, with only 24,000 students. By comparison, in Chicago Public School system alone, there are 96 high schools. And that is one of many systems in the Chicagoland region.

Burma's health system nationwide is poor, but outside the main towns as in Kachin State, it is extremely poor. 1530 beds in 43 hospitals serve the population noted above (2002-2003). The government spends only 2 or 3 percent of the GDP on health care. This stat is among the lowest in the world. (215 Hospitals serve Chicago.)

Many traditions and ways have developed among the Kachins.

- Political authority was based on chieftains supported by their immediate families.
- though originally hunters, the Kachins have become strongly agricultural

- Kachin dwellings are 2 stories, and are built out of wood and bamboo. First floor is storage, 2nd floor for living.
- Clothing for women is wool skirts in bright colors. Men often wear turbans.
- Animism was the traditional religion, but we shall see how that particular tradition changed radically.

C. The salvation story of Kachin

The famous Adoniram Judson was not the first missionary to Burma, by several years. But he was certainly the first significant one. Two others had come and gone when Judson came in the first part of the 19th century. Judson stayed. People were converted. the Bible was translated.

But though Judson and later one Eugenio Kincaid met and talked with the Kachins of Burma during this time, no serious work was started there for at least 40 years. Several missionaries went to the far north, and one, Josiah Cushing, brought with him two tribesmen from the south of Burma, from the Karen people, who stayed the better part of a year evangelizing Kachins, then were replaced by others from the same tribe.

Eventually Albert Lyon of America, with his wife, was assigned to this territory and began an established work. But only began. Within a week he had caught a fever, and within a month he had passed away into eternity.

Still the Karen evangelists came, and Cushing's replacement, James Freiday, supervised them.

It was left to a resident of Illinois, William Roberts, along with Karen workers Maw Keh and Shwe Gyaw, to answer the call and build extensively on the work that had already begun. But more tragedy struck soon, as his wife died within 18 months. Though William had to return for a while to the States, he would return and pioneer the Kachin work for 40 years.

It was rough going for the Gospel in the early years. Freiday and the Karens continued to assist, in the face of attacks, robberies, fire, sickness. And in the beginnings, not one single inquirer, much less an active Christian convert.

Roberts was joined in 1881 with another appointed couple, the Kronkhites, and a new wife, a teacher in the Kemmendine School.

Finally in 1882, seven converts received baptism and the church was formed among the animist Kachin people. Add to the seven the four missionaries and four Karen evangelists, and a church of 15 emerges in the hills of Northern Burma.

Then it began to happen more rapidly. More baptisms, establishment of schools, translation of Scriptures, preparation of a hymnal, training of leaders, opening of new mission stations.

Ola Hanson is credited with being the scholar who brought the Word of God to the people in their own language. He was not encouraged much by the people or even the King of Burma, who even then despised the Kachin people, comparing them to dogs.

Nevertheless he persisted, motivated in part by mythology that was pervasive in those hills. The people had passed down myths for generations. Some of the myths seem to have been generated by truths long ago experienced. There was a creation myth, a resurrection myth, a flood myth. And then there was the "missing book" myth. The Kachins believed and taught that God gave every race a book. But the Kachins, hungry one night, ate their book. So much for the revelation to the Kachins.

The Karen tribe, though, had a prophecy saying that one day a foreigner would bring another copy of the book back to them!

It was an arduous complex task, but Mr. Hanson eventually fulfilled that prophecy! In 1911 the New Testament was completed. In 1926, the Old. His words:

"It is with heartfelt gratitude that I lay this work at the feet of my Master. I am conscious of the defects of my work. I have tried to master Kachin, and make a translation intelligible to all. Pray with us, that our Divine Master may bless this work to the salvation of the whole Kachin race, while we are still at work here."

More missionaries, more stations, more outreaches to Kachins and others wherever the doors opened. The church grows. By 1909, 150 Christians, 8 of whom became pastors.

Fast forward to World War II. All missionaries must go. Japanese invade. Church members scatter. Some apostasize, going back to animism. Some are persecuted. But new converts come, too. The church is able to be the church throughout the occupation.

In 1948, British rule of Burma ends. That rule had included two separate administrations for this multicultural land. One was considered "Burma Proper" and included the Burman people. The other was called the "Excluded (or frontier) Areas", simply the numerous ethnic minorities that needed separate consideration.

When the British leave, the two administrations become one. For a short time non-Burmans would be allowed to secede from Burma and were granted full autonomy. The leaders of this interim regime were soon assassinated. The next leader, nationalist U Nu, in 1948 officially ignored that pluralistic agreement, and informed all minorities that they were to be a part of Burma, period.

In 1961, to make things worse for Kachins in particular, Buddhism was officially made the state religion. Here then was created the dilemma. Kachins by and large were not Buddhist nor did they desire to become Buddhist. Fear of losing their freedom has caused them through the years to take a separate path from the rest of the nation. Most of the other ethnics have made some sort of compromise with the government and live in relative peace. The Kachins, not so. They have watched what compromise does to culture in group after group across the country and the thought of that happening to them is a horrific one. They refuse to give away their culture and their faith to a government that honors neither.

Sounds like the beginnings of the American nation, perhaps? An oppressed people escaping from oppression elsewhere and refusing to compromise its principals, willing to put together a group of fighters that will challenge the standing army of a mighty nation? More than that, a people trusting that God indeed was in their fight and would win the ultimate victory.

Anyway, the World War is over, the Japanese are gone, and so the return of the missionaries. Awful scenes of destruction greet them. Sixty years' worth of church buildings nearly all up in smoke. But the rebuilding begins and prospers and the church of Kachin State continues to this day.

Denominations of Christianity in the State include hundreds of Baptist churches, some Churches of Christ, and Anglican churches. Roman Catholicism is a relatively strong presence in the land also, second only to the Baptists, who report nearly half a million in membership, with perhaps 500 ordained ministers.

All in all, the coming of Christ and His Church to the Kachin people, "fermented a social, cultural, and economic transformation. Christianity gave many poor hill tribes, and the Kachins were one of them, a common creed instead of scattered beliefs in the power of spirits. With education came self-esteem and ethnic pride, and an entirely new national consciousness." (Bertil Lintner *in the Revealer*.)

III. The Opportunity

A. Present state of the people of Kachin.

For 50 years, the Kachin people have been involved in an on & off Civil War, a struggle against the corrupt and brutal military regime and the government of President Thein Sein. The fight is for their culture, their history, their independence, their very survival as a people. The Kachins after all speak a different language, practice a different religion, and are simply not Burmese. The tool of their defense is the Kachin Independence Army, without which, according to one observer, there would be no Kachin people today.

The cease fire of the late 90's was broken in June of 2011 when the Kachins would not release territory for the building of a hydropower plant in cooperation with the Chinese government. From that time to this, 1000 soldiers have died and 120,000 residents have been displaced, some going into China and other countries.

As in all places where dictators rule, news about Burma is conflicted. The media glowingly reports a first ever meeting between an American President and the regime of Myanmar. This is May of 2013. And just before that, in March, Burma allows the UN to provide humanitarian aid, with the proviso mentioned below. There are peace talks with rebels, as the Kachins must be designated. Promises are made that reforms are on the way. The public image of the Myanmar government begins to change. There may even be somewhere in the government of Myanmar a sincere desire to change, to enter the family of nations as a full partner.

But the fact of Burma/Myanmar that cannot be erased is the presence of a brutal military that has given the nation an image of inhumanity and corruption not far from North Korea's ways, from whom by the way Myanmar may be receiving nuclear technology.

Can anyone imagine a nuclear Myanmar?

But the present reality is bad enough for the Kachin people and a host of other peoples of the nation. That reality is that the Burman Buddhist regime must have total control of all the people, the resources, the cash flow, of Myanmar, and will do everything necessary to take it. And so the attacks continue.

What has changed perhaps, and this is tragic, is that the West is looking more favorably to this junta because of the possible trade deals that may be involved. The West once was the champion of the oppressed of Myanmar, but now seems to be interested in those same resources that are being eyed by the government.

Though the interference in Kachin affairs is not every day, it is aggressive enough to leave the State of Kachin in chaos and hopelessness. In November-December of 2013, for example, the army attacked the southern part of Kachin, causing thousands to flee. On January 30, yet another attack forced the remnant to escape. Villagers were taken captive, the towns were looted. The Kachin Army tried to respond and even led some fleeing villagers back to gather some belongings, only to re-encounter the Burmese Army, for which it was no match. In the aftermath of this battle, the corpses of tortured soldiers were found.

Humanitarian aid is being sent into the region, but the "international community" is allowing the Burmese regime to control its distribution. In this way, friends of the government are permitted to penetrate Kachin territory even further.

So, the Kachin people can sit and starve, or open the door to those who would destroy them. Or abuse them. Yes, many independent reports of abusive Burmese soldiers guilty of "heinous acts of sexual violence" and torture of villagers.

B. The present state of the church of Kachin.

"To be Kachin is to be Christian" says an official of the Baptist church in one of the towns of Kachin State. When one hears statements like these he is of course reminded of other religious bodies whose adherents were simply "born" that religion. For the Christian Church, of course, there is a danger here. We know that God has no "grandchildren" and that Christianity is not passed on through human genes. Each Kachin must come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ personally and be born again.

Nevertheless if you ask 9 out of 10 Kachins what is their religion, they will give a clear answer. They know their Book is the Bible, Christ is their head, and the Church has become a part of their heart and soul. They have no desire to give it up. They will kill - in self defense - to preserve this right. Some believers State-side might have a problem with such a notion since our war is to be a spiritual one. Yet, it was spiritual warfare that finally opened the door for Judson and Roberts and all the rest to come to this remote part of the earth and preach Jesus. That same warfare allowed heart after heart to come into a

saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Only warring that sort of war will keep individual Kachins in the Kingdom of God.

So, how far are we to take our Christ into the political and military machines of our day? Many American Christians would agree with the "spiritual warfare" concept, but in the next breath desire that radical Muslims be bombed into eternity by our government, today if possible.

There's something missing there. But we understand the idea. Jesus loves me so He must love my people. Anything that harms me or my people is the enemy and Jesus gives victory over enemies...doesn't He?

Again Americans, victors in the two World Wars and a few others, are willing to believe that God is on their side when they fight a "just war." Whatever that might mean... Some Christians are backing away from the justice of American causes in our day. It's not an easy thing to discuss.

But bring it back to home, and listen to the Kachin dilemma. What if your very home or family member or person or church is suddenly under physical attack. Have you considered what the next step would be, or have we been in a peaceful land so long that this is beyond our comprehension? To help you get thinking about it, be sure to consult the Word. But take a look at Kachin State too. The gut reaction for every true man or woman is to fight. To stand up and protect what is yours. That is what they are doing. In some cases they are winning this struggle. Corpses all over the land testify to the fact that in some cases they are not.

"We believe God will not abandon us," says one Kachin. Ultimately this is true, even in seemingly God-forsaken North Korea. God's people find a way to survive, to prosper, to overcome, though not always in the way they had thought they would.

The issue is complex. But let's get it back to simple terms. You and I have hundreds of thousands of brothers and sisters in the hills of Northeast Myanmar whose lives have been so sub-standard for so long that the standard becomes dim. War. Murder. Rape. Refugees. Hunger. Pain. What can we do about it?

C. What to do?

Begin by prayer. Ask God to direct you to people who are dealing directly with the Kachin people. Find a secure and stable way to funnel help to these people. Then make a commitment that as long as God supplies strength you will keep funneling that money in. Some, because of your help, will be able to have a solid roof over their heads. Some will be able to preach the Gospel, to build a fellowship of believers. Some will eat a little better, care for their children a little more. Things like you do all the time, they will be able to do. I have begun my praying. Some doors have opened to me. I will not give you any leads lest you think I am representing a particular organization or person. You pray and I'll pray and God will supply their needs according to His riches in glory. And He is rich!

Sources of Information about the Kachin

1. The Manna Mission of Chiang Mai (Thailand)
2. Wikipedia, the *Jingpo people*
3. Wikipedia, the *Kachin people*
4. Wikipedia, *Kachin State*
5. Wikipedia, *Kachin Baptist Convention*
6. Online: *Burma: Faith and resistance in Kachin*, Bertil Lintner
7. Online: *The Growth of Christianity in the Kachin People*, Htoigintawng.over-blog.com's name
8. Online: *Burma: continued ethnic cleansing of Christian Kachin*, Christian News on Christian Today
9. Online: *Myanmar's Christian rebels carry on fight for survival* -Washington Times
10. Various You Tube Videos show the Civil War and customs of the Kachin people.
11. From International Christian Concern, Persecution.org, *Why Is Burma Army Targeting Kachin Christians?*