

Medic in Exile

Jeffery Kluger, Bryan Walsh. *TIME Magazine*. 7 November 2005.

It's hard to feel good about a person described as an absconder, an insurgent and an opium-smuggling terrorist--unless the group doing the name calling is the military junta that runs Burma (Myanmar) and the person being defamed is Dr. Cynthia Maung. Since 1988, Maung has been building and running a thriving medical clinic on the treacherous Thailand-Burma border, providing badly needed health care for 70,000 people a year and facing down one of the most oppressive dictatorships in the world to do it.

If you're looking for a case study in how a government can fail the health needs of its people, Burma is a good place to start. The seeds of the country's problems were sown long ago, and Maung, 45, knows them well. A member of Burma's Karen ethnic minority, which has fought a simmering half-century war for independence, she grew up in a region that had never been quite at peace. She kept her head down long enough to make it to the capital, Yangon (then known as Rangoon), where she attended medical school in the mid-1980s, then returned home to work in clinics in Karen villages.

But in 1988, the junta came to power, killing up to 3,000 pro-democracy demonstrators. Later it turned its wrath on the Karen. Maung and 14 of her colleagues fled to Thailand. "We didn't think we'd be gone long," she says. "Maybe six months."

It didn't work out that way. Arriving in the Thai town of Mae Sot, she and her fellow clinicians learned that their skills were sorely needed there. Thousands of activists had also fled through the jungle, many staggering into Thailand sick with malaria. To care for them, she set up a makeshift clinic in a nearby barn. As the trickle of evacuees turned into a flood, many of the expats arriving in Thailand headed straight for the clinic.

Maung, overwhelmed by patients, became equal parts caregiver and administrator. She began raising funds from international refugee organizations, Karen communities in Thailand, religious groups and other Thai charities. She recruited volunteers,



FEARLESS: Maung, center, defies the junta

taught them front-line medical care and expanded the clinic's services to include HIV testing, maternal care, vaccinations, infectious-disease treatment and more. With the junta tightening its hold, she settled in for a long stay.

Today that stay is in its 17th year. Her little facility, now known as the Mae Tao clinic, has grown into a complex of buildings that includes operating rooms, a pediatric and maternity ward, a laboratory, a blood bank, an eye-care facility, a 100-bed hospital and a school. Built around a central courtyard, it feels less like a clinic and more like a de facto town-- one that treats up to 400 patients a day, educates 4,000 migrant children and even issues birth certificates and marriage licenses.

Its presence still galls the junta in Yangon. In 1997 soldiers destroyed a handful of local facilities that Maung had set up in the hill country in Burma. To replace them, she and her staff have assembled teams of health-care workers who slip into Burma and deliver care, village by village. The volunteers, known as backpack medics, face arrest if caught, and Maung knows that if she steps back over the border, the junta will pounce. So for now, she stays at Mae Tao, providing medical care for a nation of the displaced and hoping to return to the land of her birth. "We're building a community," she says, "so we can rebuild Burma one day."

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