

Loss of innocence

Power struggle among dissidents leads to murder

In February this year, *The Nation*, a newspaper published from Bangkok, reported that dissident Burmese students at a remote rebel camp in northern Burma had executed 15 of their own members after accusing them of being government spies. REVIEW correspondent Bertil Lintner has travelled several times to China's Yunnan province, across the border from the student camps, where he had met and interviewed both some of the alleged spies who were later killed and their executioners. He investigated the story further by visiting dissident student camps elsewhere in Burma last month.

By Bertil Lintner in Bangkok

"Kill the beast! Cut his throat! Spill his blood!" shouted Piggy and Ralph in William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*. The book traces a fight for survival that provokes the worst aspects of human nature — ranging from envy and vicious struggles for supremacy to outright cruelty and murder — among a group of initially innocent young boys stranded on an uninhabited island.

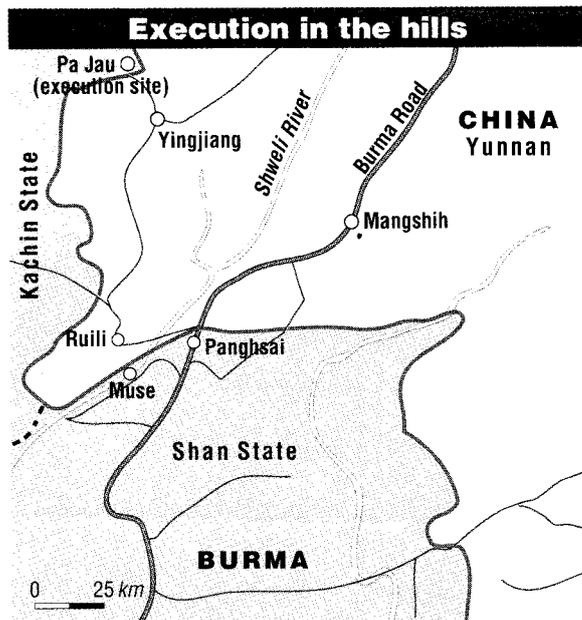
What happened on Golding's fictional Pacific island has been repeated in reality in the cold, barren hills of northern Burma. On the afternoon of 12 February this year, 15 alleged government spies were executed at a dissident student camp near Pa Jau in Kachin State. With their hands and feet shackled, the accused were brought to a field in the camp, its 30-40 inhabitants having been ordered to watch the spectacle. The first five prisoners were told to lie down. A young man came forward with a sword, decapitated them and held up their severed heads to the other students — and to the prisoners awaiting their turn to die. The remaining 10 men were then unceremoniously shot.

Among those beheaded was Tun Aung Gyaw, the 30-year-old chairman of the northern section of the All-Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF). As a student at the government-run Technical Institute in Mandalay, he had taken part in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. When the army launched a bloody crackdown on the movement, resulting in thousands of deaths, he fled to the Kachin hills in northernmost Burma, where he was determined to avenge the 1988 massacres.

With him came hundreds of other like-minded young people, girls as well as

boys, who linked up with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the main ethnic rebel group in the north. The KIA taught the students the rudiments of guerilla warfare and soon many of them were taking part in raids on government positions in the northern hills.

A much larger exodus took place in the south, to areas controlled by Karen and Mon rebels along the Thai border. In October 1988, thousands of students and other pro-democracy activists were camp-



ing in the hills near the Three Pagodas Pass and opposite the Thai border town of Mae Sot. The mood was cheerful as they gathered around the nightly campfires to sing democracy songs and listen to impassioned appeals for armed struggle against the new military regime in Rangoon, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC).

Sitting in a camp near the Thai border,

Mee Mee, a 19-year-old university student from Rangoon, told me at the time: "We have to fight. The junta promises democracy and general elections even as it shoots down scores of students and arrests our comrades in Rangoon. We have to arm ourselves and fight back. I'm not afraid to die."

On the border, memories of the legendary anti-Japanese struggle in the 1940s lingered. There were also many new "Aung Sams" — the national hero who led the movement for independence against the British 50 years ago — who dreamed of setting up their own armies of freedom fighters. But this "second struggle for independence," as Aung San's daughter, Aung San Suu Kyi, had once termed the pro-democracy movement in a speech in Rangoon in August 1988, lacked experience as well as cohesiveness.

The harsh realities of life in the jungle bore little resemblance to the tales told in the cities. The immediate concerns of most of the mainly urban-raised students were sickness and malnutrition. Some died of malaria shortly after arriving in the jungle, while others suffered skin diseases, eye infections and dysentery during their long and hazardous treks from the towns and cities of the central plains to the guerilla-controlled frontier areas.

Obtaining food, a problem since they left the towns, became a laborious act of survival in the hard-scrabble hills along the frontier. The students soon found themselves eating snakes, lizards, dogs and whatever else they could forage in their new surroundings.

By the end of 1988, hundreds of the would-be fighters had gone back to Rangoon, Moulmein, Toungoo, Taunggyi and Mandalay, or wherever they had come from. Others drifted into Thailand, where more than 1,000 applied for refugee status with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Some managed to find odd jobs at construction sites in the border towns, or ended up in Bangkok's myriad sweat shops. Most simply became disillusioned and passive when their initial anger had worn off.

Among the determined few who remained in the jungle, however, another problem rapidly emerged: leadership. Some of those who had been activists before they fled to the jungle naturally expected to become leaders on the border as well. As a result, bitter power struggles broke out, turning some previously mild-mannered pro-democracy activists from Burma's universities into local tyrants and warlords.

I met Tun Aung Gyaw in the Chinese border town of Mangshih in January 1991. He arrived at the appointed place, a ram-



The alleged spies await their 'trials' before execution.

shackle noodle shop in the centre of town, accompanied by a group of other young men. Two were introduced to me as his bodyguards and a third as his "main intelligence officer."

Tun Aung Gyaw wore a black leather jacket and steel-rimmed sun-glasses. He ordered one of his aides to produce a stack of colour photographs from his bag. "This is me," he said proudly, pointing at a man in a crisp, olive-green uniform with a pistol in a gleaming leather holster at his hip. He also sported a red beret and the obligatory sun-glasses. Other pictures showed similarly attired former students, posing with AK47 assault rifles and rocket launchers.

I tried to ask them about the latest news about the movement in Kachin State. Instead of an answer, they handed me a cassette tape of revolutionary music. "Give this to the BBC and All-India Radio," they demanded. I told them I was in no position to do so and that, in any case, I doubted whether these radio stations would be interested in broadcasting their recordings. They seemed more surprised than disappointed.

I was the first foreign correspondent they had met. Isolated in Burma's northern hills, far away from the Bangkok press corps, international refugee agencies and charities who frequently visited the ABSDF camps along the Thai border in the south, they appeared to have little or no notion of events in the outside world.

I again met some northern ABSDF leaders in Ruili, another Chinese border town in Yunnan, in January this year. What had previously been little more than youthful bravado, albeit with a chilling edge to it, had turned into a nasty power struggle. "We've uncovered a spy ring. The SLORC tried to infiltrate our ranks and poison our leaders. But we discovered the plot in time," one ABSDF leader announced. Tun Aung Gyaw was among the alleged spies who had been arrested. The new leader

also wore a leather jacket and sported sun-glasses.

I was told the supposed plot was uncovered in August 1991 when the Chinese police in Yingjiang, across the border from Pa Jau, arrested 10 young Burmese armed with pistols and grenades. They were sent to Pa Jau, and the witch-hunt began. The arrested "confessed" to being armed in order to assassinate the northern ABSDF leadership, and revealed the names of other "accomplices." By November, 80 out of the northern ABSDF's total of 800 students had been arrested by their peers. Out of 19 central committee members, nine were in chains.

A video tape later released by the ABSDF shows the accused being brought to "justice." A row of uniformed young men are seated at a wooden table, looking more like mediaeval inquisitors than the pro-democracy activists they purport to be. One of them took down notes in a ledger as the accused admitted to their supposed crimes. They all admitted to being junior officers in Burma's feared Military Intelligence (MI) secret police. They all said they had been sent to conspire against the pro-democracy movement, sow confusion and poison its leaders.

The confessions were as meticulous in detail as one I saw in the Khmer Rouge's Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh a few years ago, and extracted in a similar fashion: by torture. Beatings and electric shocks were administered. At night, the prisoners were kept in a bamboo hut, shackled to-

gether without blankets on the earthen floor. Pa Jau is bitterly cold at night, which I recall from my own time there in April-October 1986. "At one stage, when the prisoners tried to wave signals to each other, one of their captors singled out a few offenders and chopped off their hands as a warning," a Western visitor recently in Pa Jau recounts.

While some of the arrested may have been government informers — most resistance groups in Burma are believed to be heavily infiltrated by MI agents — outsiders have pointed out that 10% of an entire organisation seems an unbelievable figure.

One of the alleged spies, Kyaw Naing Oo, was a National League for Democracy organiser in Tharrawaddy, southern Burma, before he fled to the north. "He was well-known in town. Aung San Suu Kyi herself stayed in his house when she travelled through Tharrawaddy. I don't believe he was a spy," a source who knew Kyaw Naing Oo well said.

The SLORC did not miss the opportunity to take political advantage of the executions. Somehow, 55 of the 65 survivors managed to escape in May. One died on the way, but the rest returned to Rangoon via China. Appearing at a press conference in Rangoon on 3 June, they related their stories.

However, instead of presenting a factual account of the savagery in the north,

which would have been more than enough to discredit the movement, the military staged a crude propaganda show which was no more convincing than the video-taped "confessions." The press briefing ended with a personal attack on the Bangkok reporter who first broke the news in February of the gruesome events in Kachin State. Probably the only true line in the official *Working People's Daily's* account of the events was that the killings were an outcome of factionalism and power struggles within the ABSDF rather than an MI conspiracy.

The 15 "spies" were executed on Burma's Union Day, which commemorates an agreement signed in 1947 between the majority Burmans and some ethnic minorities to create a unified state. The day was meant to mark solidarity between the country's multitude of nationalities and the foundation of democratic federalism, that existed from independence in 1948 until the military takeover in 1962. ■



ABSDF leader: guardian of 'justice.'