

The BACKPACKER MEDICS

Several hundred volunteer healthcare workers dodge bullets and risk arrest to bring a little comfort to tens of thousands of displaced people in eastern Burma

By YENI

1 **T**he volunteer was trapped as the Burmese soldiers entered the Karen village looking for trouble. If they had found him, his fate would have been grim. Two of his colleagues have been shot and others have been tortured or jailed—simply for offering basic healthcare to villagers in Burma's violence-plagued Karen State.

2 But the young volunteer, who has the optimistic-sounding name Living, was shielded by grateful families and eventually made it back to base at Mae Sot, just inside Thailand. Living, 30, is one of the 300-strong Backpack Health Worker Team that roams on foot through a region where an estimated 140,000 people, many displaced from their villages by junta soldiers, exist without access to proper medical care.

3 The NGO volunteers, made up of people from many different Burmese ethnic regions, travel in groups of two or three for two weeks at a time, spending about three days in a village and running temporary clinics in bamboo huts in hilly and heavily forested areas.

To these poor villagers, they are known as the backpacker medics, who provide humanitarian help

4 wherever they can in a harsh and dangerous environment, dodging roaming military groups and jungle fighting. To the *Tatmadaw*, the regime's armed forces, they are just as much the enemy as the Karen rebels resisting army incursions into Karen State.

5 Living, a Karen, is on a *Tatmadaw* blacklist. So too is the founder of the Backpack Health Worker Team, Dr Cynthia Maung. The idea of creating mobile healthcare teams evolved after she established the Mae Tao clinic in Mae Sot.

6 It is a noble cause fraught with great risks for her helpers. Cynthia Maung, also a Karen and known to those she helps as Burma's "Mother Teresa"—after the nun who worked for many years among India's poor—said: "In the last six months, three of our workers were arrested and jailed. One midwife was captured with medical supplies and was tortured by the Burmese army."

7 One reason, perhaps, why the medical teams are blacklisted by the military is because they don't just carry medical aid in the backpacks—they also distribute educational material.

8 The material circulates among about 140,000 displaced people and others living in Burma's eastern conflict zones in Karen, Karenni and Mon

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states. "Our target is the forgotten people who do not have any access to even basic healthcare," said Mahn Mahn, one of the medical team leaders.

The group recently produced a report that illustrates the sad relationship between the quality of healthcare and human rights violations. The report, titled *Chronic Emergency*, says long-term armed conflicts, human rights abuses such as forced relocation, forced labor, and the destruction of crops have created a major health crisis. Forced relocation doubles the chance of children's death and raises the risk of injury from a landmine fivefold. Food insecurity breeds malnutrition, says the report.

The most common cause of death continues to be malaria, with more than 12 percent of the population at any given time infected with *Plasmodium falciparum*, the most dangerous strain. One in 12 women die in childbirth. More than 15 percent of children suffer malnutrition in the conflict zones, and sanitation and safe drinking water are inadequate, adding to health problems.

In the areas covered by the mobile medics, 33 percent of households have experienced forced labor, 10 percent of people have been forcibly driven from their homes and 25 percent have had their food confiscated or destroyed by the Burmese military.

The report is supported by Voravit Suwanvanichkij a researcher with the Johns Hopkins Center for Public Health and Human Rights. "There is a humanitarian catastrophe," he told *The Irrawaddy*.

The standard public health indicators such as infant mortality rates, and child and mother mortality ratios in Burma's eastern conflict zones resemble Cambodia shortly after the collapse of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime, as well as some African countries, such as Sierra Leone, Niger and Angola, which face huge humanitarian crises, said Voravit.

But Burma's health crisis is not

confined to villages and rural areas; poor health is also a common problem in urban areas, according to Voravit and other researchers.

In 2000, Burma's healthcare system was ranked by the World Health Organization below every other country in a WHO study except Sierra Leone, and the situation has not improved since then.

State-run hospitals lack proper funding. Staff are poorly paid and are often reliant on cash incentives for priority treatment.

Patients and their families often must bribe hospital workers to obtain even substandard treatment. Most families, in any case, have to buy drugs from private pharmacies. And with up to 70 percent of household expenditures going towards food, according to UN reports, many have to go without basic education and health services.

But no matter how bad it is in the urban areas, the situation is grimmer in the eastern conflict zones, said Voravit. "No one cares about the people living there except the backpacker medics." The junta's efforts to enforce increasingly restrictive conditions on international NGOs have put them beyond other help. For those beyond the reach of even the volunteer backpacker teams, families have to take great risks to reach a township with some degree of healthcare. They have to negotiate landmines, bandits and Burmese soldiers.

A survey last year by the Thailand Burma Border Consortium said the number of displaced people in Burma's eastern regions was estimated to be at least 540,000. These comprised 340,000 people at temporary settlements in ceasefire areas administered by ethnic minorities, 92,000 civilians hiding from government troops in areas affected by military skirmishes, and 108,000 villagers who had followed Burmese soldiers' eviction orders and moved into designated relocation sites.

Since that report, says the TBBC, the number of displaced people is reported



PHOTO: FBK

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”

to have grown to almost 163,000, swollen by further Burmese army action in eastern Karen State.

However, the Naypyidaw government denies the displacement figures, claiming they are mostly propaganda by the opposition and armed rebels. In May, Information Minister Brig-Gen Kyaw Hsan said: "The so-called refugees are nothing but terrorists, their families, relatives and hard-core supporters who live near the border."



A Karen family in Taungoo District shelters from the rain while hiding from Burmese troops

22 In recent weeks, there have been fresh reports of killing and plundering in Karen State by Burmese army units implementing forced labor, confiscation of land and other threats to stability.

23 The chances of internal resettlement of the displaced look bleak, say observers. And even heightened prospects for resettlement in third countries for those who cross into border areas of Thailand—especially the US State Department's promise to allow about 9,300 members of the Karen minority to be considered for political asylum—come with problems. 25

24 Some border-based NGO community care organizations may see resettlement programs as a threat to the sustainability of assistance projects inside Burma and along the border. 26

Why? Because locally trained NGO workers might move from the area and reduced refugee numbers might mean a smaller NGO presence, analysts say.

But the commitment and energy of the Backpack Health Worker Team will not wane, whatever happens on the border, says Cynthia Maung. She says that with the enthusiastic support of a new generation of Burmese who want to help, she can always fill any gaps in her teams.

That will be some small comfort at least for the tens of thousands cowering from regime soldiers in the eastern forests. As one Burmese patient put it, Cynthia Maung, her backpacker medics and her Mae Sot clinic are "like a bonfire in the cold, dark night." ■

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Selected article: *The Backpacker Medics*, page 21-23

Activities to do Before Reading

Activity 1

- What do you know?
- What do you think you know?
- What do you want to know?

This article is entitled 'The Backpacker Medics'. Who are they?
Why are they called this?
What do you know about them? What do you think you know? What do you want to know about them? Complete this chart.

The Backpacker Medics		
Things I know	Things I think I know	Things I want to know

Activity 2

Prediction: True or False

Do you think these sentences are true or false?

- a. The Backpacker Medics are all Karen.
- b. Dr. Cynthia started the Backpacker Medics.
- c. There is a relationship between human rights violations and healthcare.
- d. Burma's healthcare system is the worst in the world.
- e. There are less than 500,000 displaced people in Eastern Burma.

Activity 3

Describing Personality

- a. We use adjectives such as shy, assertive and foolish to describe people's personality. These words are known as personality traits. What personality traits do you think a Backpacker Medic needs? e.g. *brave*
- b. What are the opposite personality traits? Use a dictionary if necessary. e.g. *cowardly*

Activities to do During Reading

Activity 4

Words from context

Here are some sentences from the article. Find them in the text, and choose the best synonym or definition for the underlined words.

1. Living, 30, is one of the 300-strong Backpack Health Worker Team that roams on foot... (paragraph 2)
 - a. travels
 - b. hides
 - c. delivers
 - d. climbs
2. The idea of creating mobile health care teams evolved after she established the Mae Tao clinic in Mae Sot. (paragraph 5)
 - a. ended
 - b. was lost
 - c. grew
 - d. fled
3. The standard public health indicators such as infant mortality rates and child and mother mortality ratios in Burma's eastern conflict zones resemble Cambodia... (paragraph 13)
 - a. copy
 - b. consider
 - c. follow
 - d. are similar to
4. But Burma's health crisis is not confined to villages and rural areas; (paragraph 14)
 - a. limited
 - b. passed
 - c. taken
 - d. started
5. In recent weeks, there have been fresh reports of killing and plundering in Karen state by Burmese army units... (paragraph 22)
 - a. burning
 - b. stealing
 - c. shooting
 - d. mining
6. That will be some small comfort at least for the tens of thousands cowering from regime soldiers in the eastern forests. (paragraph 26)
 - a. stealing
 - b. receiving
 - c. running
 - d. hiding

Activity 5

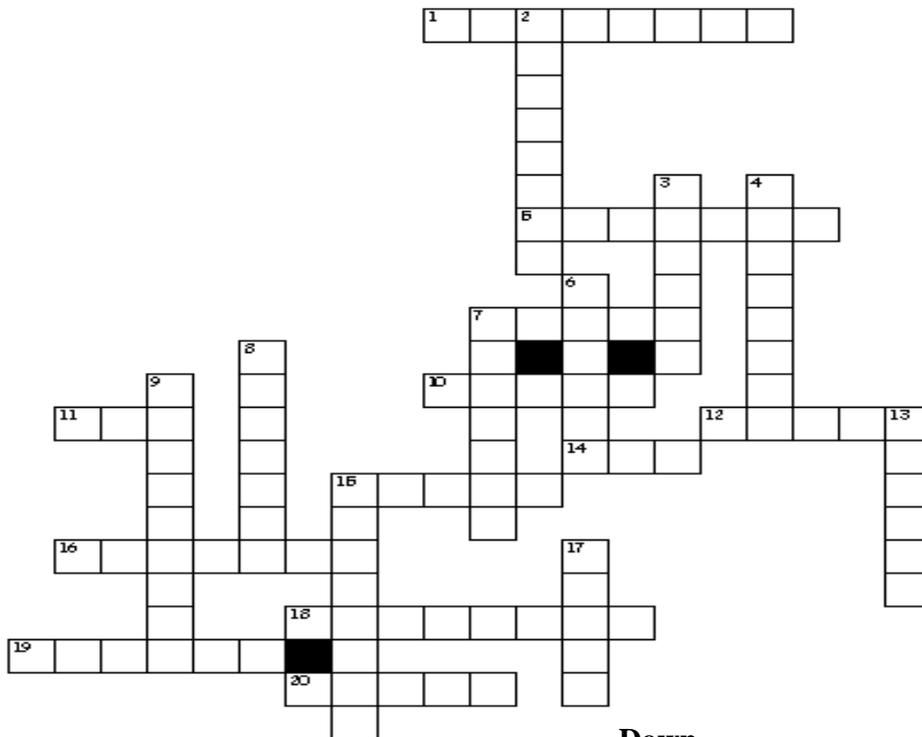
Check the predictions

Scan the article, and check whether your predictions from **Activity 2** are right or wrong. You should scan the article as quickly as possible – don't read it for detail.

Activity 6**Comprehension**

Read the article more carefully, and answer these questions.

- a. Who is Dr. Cynthia compared with?
- b. How many Backpacker Medics have been arrested in the last 6 months?
- c. What do the Medics deliver in addition to medical supplies?
- d. What is the main reason for death in the areas mentioned?
- e. What do patients often have to do to receive treatment from state-run hospitals?
- f. Why don't international NGOs work in the Eastern conflict zones?
- g. How does the SPDC Information Minister describe the refugees?
- h. Who does Dr. Cynthia think will replace Health Workers who are resettled?

Activity 7**Crossword****Across**

1. a bag that you carry on your back
5. _____ emergency, report title
7. money given to persuade someone to do something
10. Mother Teresa worked in this country
11. Non-governmental Organisation
12. you buy these at the pharmacy
14. an empty space between two things
15. _____ country, place for resettlement
16. a person who gets treatment in a hospital
18. a bomb planted in the ground
19. To run without getting tired, you need _____
20. Dr. Cynthia _____.

Down

2. A area where there is fighting is called a _____ zone.
3. frontier between two countries
4. person who lives in a village
6. an optimistic Backpacker from this article
7. a large outdoor fire
8. a medic who helps women have babies
9. to work for free
13. getting information by asking a lot of people a set of questions
15. The SPDC army
17. military government

Activities to do After Reading

Activity 8

Writing

Imagine you are a Backpacker Medic on a trip in Eastern Burma. Dr. Cynthia has asked you to keep a diary of your trip. Write an entry for one day of your trip. First, make a plan by thinking of the things you would write about.

Activity 9

Presentation

You have just returned from your trip inside Burma. You faced many problems during your trip, mainly because a lack of supplies meant that you were unable to treat all patients properly. Next week an organisation will visit Mae Tao clinic to discuss extra funding for the Backpacker Medics. Dr. Cynthia has asked your group to give a presentation about your recent trip inside to try and convince the funders that you need the money.

Design and present your case – explain about the conditions inside and the useful work the Backpackers do. Make sure that every person in your group participates in the presentation.