

BEYOND 1988 — REFLECTIONS

Malaria: The Nearest Enemy — the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) after 1988

Monday 21 April 2008, by [Aung Naing Oo](#) (Date first published: 19 March 2008).

Camp Thay Baw Boe, 1989: Despite our resolve to fight the Burmese army and sacrifice our lives for freedom and democracy, the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) was poorly equipped and extremely under-funded. So the battle against Burmese troops that many idealists, including me, dreamed of before we joined the exodus was a non-starter. In fact, about 90 percent of us never experienced or even saw a battle.

But even before we could hold a wooden stick in military training, let alone a real gun, we were already fighting our nearest No 1 enemy: malaria.

In the coming years, malaria killed a lot more students than bullets fired by the junta's soldiers. The resources at the camp's small hospital were stretched, and it was always filled with patients. There were not enough mosquito nets for all the students and the way our bamboo barracks were constructed it was open invitation to bloodthirsty mosquitoes.

The hospital could not provide proper nutrition to patients to build up their immunity. The best food it could offer was one or two packets of "mama," a popular Thai noodle dish with little nutritional content.

There are two kinds of malaria: black water fever and cerebral. Both are very dangerous.

If a patient's urine turns black, it is clearly black water fever. If there is no appropriate medicine, they will die.

If not treated in time, cerebral malaria attacks the brain, rendering patients "gout"—Burmese slang for crazy—for a few months.

During my time in the jungle, I attended funerals for students who died of malaria. I can still see the funeral processions and brief services for our comrades who died alone with no close relatives nearby. A few people would speak briefly, wishing them well and bidding their souls to go freely as "they so wished."

I was lucky. Unlike my friend Tin Htun who fell ill within two weeks of arriving at the camp, it took five months for malaria to find me.

It was at the end of February in 1989. Of the seventy-five people in my group, three of us were healthy. We were proud, and we started boasting that we were "men of steel."

Three or four days later, I felt ill. I remember the day clearly. In the morning, I ate watery, ash

pumpkin soup and fish paste with “katet chin,” fermented leaves from small mangrove-like trees found near the water. In the afternoon, I was sick—no more “Mr Man of Steel.” What I ate that day had nothing to do with the malaria, but I avoided pumpkin and katet chin for years.

You never fully recovered from malaria if you continue to live in a malaria-infested area. I knew when a relapse would occur by the signs in my body, such as chills, muscle ache and lethargy, which would send me running to the hospital for quinine. Then I would try to go about my business.

The first attack was tough and the relapse was worse. When I took quinine I felt I could hear a continuous humming sound all the time. One night a droning sound woke me up about two in the morning. I thought government planes might be approaching to drop bombs. I got up and looked at the sky. It was a clear moon-lit night, and all I saw were stars.

Min Naing, one of my barrack mates, fell ill one day—a relapse. It was black water fever. I was really worried and stayed up all night beside his hospital bed fanning him and reciting “Samvode,” a Buddhist sutta to ward off bad karma that I learned from my parents. Luckily, Min Naing, who now lives in Canada, survived.

Another member of our group, San Aye, contracted a severe case of cerebral malaria. He had to be taken to the clinic in Mae Sot. At the time, the camp was undergoing military training. Since I was recovering from malaria myself, I was free to take him to Mae Sot. However, we had no money in the camp to rent a car.

I took San Aye to Thay Baw Boe market in a Thai red bus. San Aye’s body was twitching, but I had to leave him with the driver because I did not have any money for a trip to Mae Sot. I went to the customs office to try to borrow the fare from Captain Win Lwin, a Karen officer in charge of the office, but he simply refused.

I knew why the Karen did not want to lend money to students—even small amounts. A few weeks earlier, Camp Chairman S. Aung Lwin had borrowed about 6,000 baht from the Karen. He promised to repay the loan within the appointed time but he didn’t, mainly because he was away when the repayment was due.

The Karen are simple and straightforward people. They keep their promises and expect others to do the same. Unfortunately in my case, the Karen were angry because S. Aung Lwin, himself a Karen, had not kept his promise. Captain Win Lwin even reminded me that S. Aung Lwin owed the Karen money.

But there was a more serious reason why the Karen did not want to lend me, a camp leader, any money, even when one of my men lay twitching in the back of the bus right before their eyes. About a week before this incident, the KNU had called student leaders from the nearby area to a group meeting in a hall near the soccer field where we took our first military training.

In the meeting, chaired by the head of the KNU sixth bridge, Major General Shwe Sai, the Karen announced the classification of students into three revolutionary categories. In their eyes, some students were not revolutionary enough. Students were classified as genuine revolutionaries who lived and fought in the jungle; friends of the revolutionaries, or students who did not fight but would assist the movement; and others who would not leave the jungle.

The announcement did not bother most people in our camp, but it angered the students living in the Mae Sot area. They fired off a statement accusing the KNU of trying to divide the students. This in turn angered the KNU, and now they did not want to have anything to do with the students. The Karen did not seem to differentiate between the students who lived in the jungle and in town. Thus,

we all became victims of the fallout.

That was the background. But my problem was in the here and now. I needed 500 baht to help my sick friend get to the clinic. I walked up and down Thay Baw Boe market looking for anyone I knew who might loan me the money. Daffanie, the wife of the KNU General Secretary, Col Htoo Htoo Lay, who lived on Second Street at Thay Baw Boe market, saw me pacing up and down and asked what was the matter. I explained, and she quickly gave me 500 baht. I thanked her profusely and ran back to the bus.

San Aye survived, but he received treatment at Dr Cynthia's clinic for about three months. After that, he was not his old self sometimes, which we felt was a result of the cerebral malaria.

My last bout with malaria—the worst I ever experienced— was in 1994 while living in Bangkok. Since then, even though I have returned to the border and the jungle again and again, I have not contracted malaria.

For years, malaria remained the main life-threatening enemy of the ABSDF members rather than the soldiers in the Burmese army.

P.S.

* From The Irrawaddy, under the title "Malaria: The Nearest Enemy":

http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=11460&page=2