



STRUGGLE FOR PEACE

THE 25 YEAR JOURNEY OF THE ABSDF

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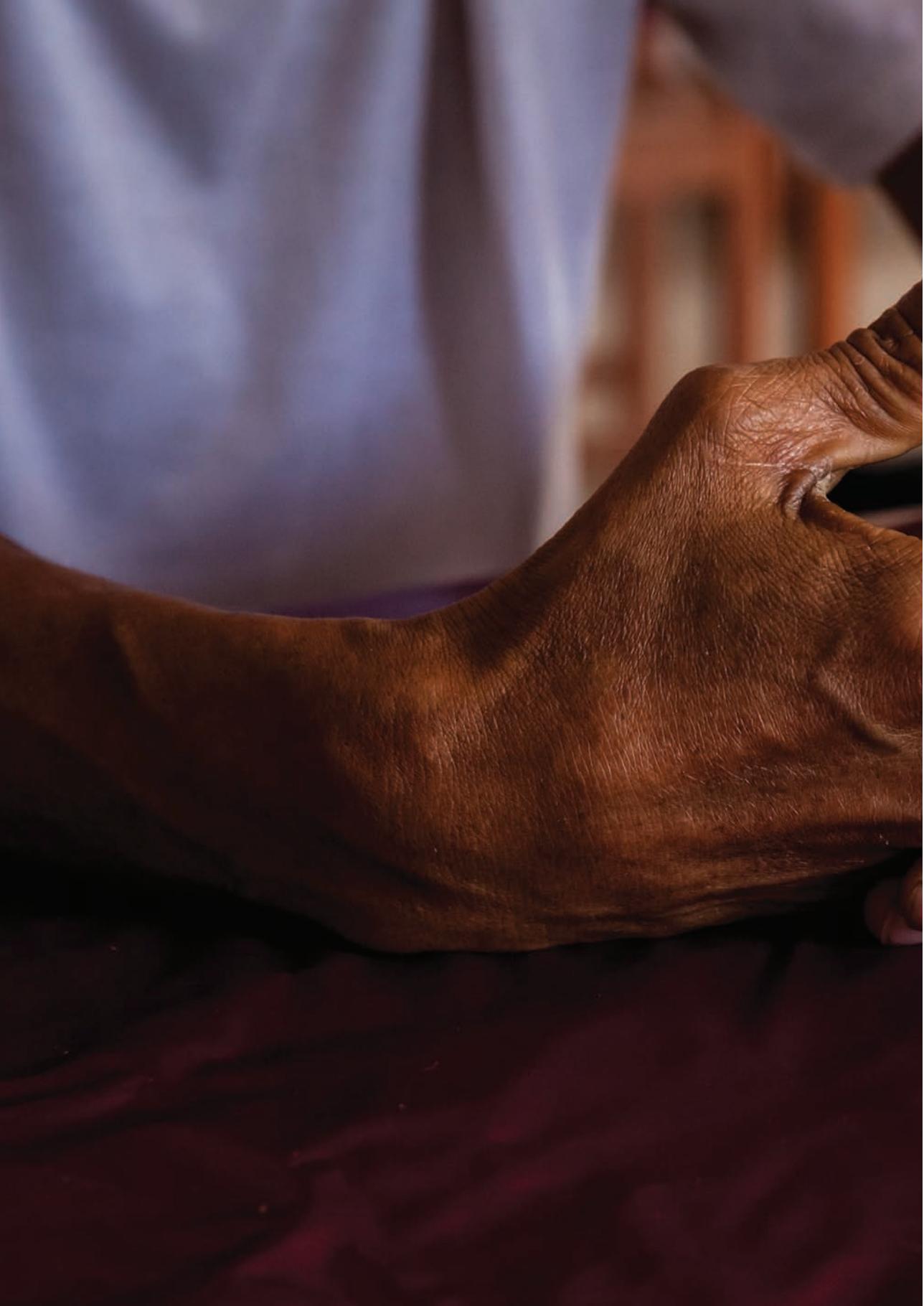
STRUGGLE FOR PEACE
THE 25 YEAR JOURNEY OF THE ABSDF

ABSDF is the only student-based organisation; we are getting old... we are more like teachers now. Students represent everybody, that's why we formed a student's army, the only student's army in Burmese history. But we took the arms because of the government suppression of our movements. This should not be repeated in the future.

At that time we had no experience with armed revolution, we only knew what we read from books. We left the country and joined the armed struggle, but before I decided to leave and join the revolution I did not think too much about what would it mean, how hard would it be, what it would mean for my family, because I am the only son. I have three sisters. My father was a teacher. My family had many expectations for me, but after seeing the incidents and the bloodshed during the uprising in 1988 I could not think about my family and left. After 20 years I communicated with my father. He was very sad but he never criticized me. (Ko Thura)

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INTRODUCTION

After 25 years of armed struggle the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF) has embarked in a process of transformation. Change, adaptation, flexibility are all words that the ABSDF men and women know very well; they have shaped their existence. ABSDF members have learnt to live in places foreign to them (the jungles in the border areas, the refugee camps...); they have entered into alliances with different ethnic armed groups and, by doing this, questioned their own understanding of the ethnic divisions within their country. They have become a bridge between the Burman majority and the ethnic groups. They have been challenged and they have overcome these challenges.

Their journey to peace provides a time for reflection, a moment to look back at the past and the way it impacts the present. It also raises questions about the future. The ABSDF members left their homes and families 25 years ago. Soon they will perhaps return back to the place where they belong. But what does it mean returning home with dignity?

We at CPCS understand that capturing the stories of the ABSDF men and women, providing them with a space to reflect and to share their personal stories of resistance and struggle, as well as their hopes for the future, can contribute to this transformative moment. We also believe that by doing this we can help to build an inclusive culture of remembering the past in Myanmar.

In every conflict multiple truths and narratives exist but there is a danger of losing some voices, especially those who hold less power. This is the reason why we framed this intervention as a peacebuilding strategy and we called it a Peace History Project. This project provides a space where the ABSDF members can tell their truths and their narratives of the last 25 years.

The ABSDF Central Leading Committee provided CPCS with a list of people they would like to be interviewed. It was a very diverse list in terms of age, experiences and roles within the ABSDF but not in terms of gender. It was limited to current ABSDF members, although the voices of former members have been included to some extent through poetry. Interviews were conducted over the course of six months from February to August 2013.

The project aimed to capture voices as well as images. Since the beginning we were lucky to have the photographer, Kannan Arunasalam, on board. His pictures bring the faces of ABSDF members, their families and their daily life. They also show a country in a moment of change.

Memories are subjective, contradictory and sometimes opposing but they also reflect commonalities and joint perceptions. They provide a space where the collective and the individual intersect and often blend together.

Through the course of this project the ABSDF and CPCS have travelled together. This has been a physical journey across different locations and a journey across different times and moments. It has also been an emotional journey, for those who were telling their stories, and for those listening to them. We have shared laughter and good humour, but also tears, pain and sorrow. This has been a journey of trust.

We at CPCS have felt extremely privileged.

Interviewees have been exceptionally generous. Their memories have taken us back to their childhood, their hopes and dreams at that time, and the hopes of their families. We have also travelled to 1988 Burma and felt the energy, disappointment, anger and fear of that time. We have crossed mountains together whilst they recounted their journey to the jungle, the camps, and the frontline. Through their eyes we have understood the beauty of the struggle,

as well as its ugliness and destruction. We have seen the ABSDF growing and maturing, as individuals as well as collectively as an armed group. We have witnessed their daily life in exile and their transition to peace with the signing of two ceasefire agreements with the Myanmar government.

We hope the reader of this book will also embark on a journey. A journey through the lives of these men and women, through their choices, decisions, achievements, failures and contradictions. A journey through a part of Myanmar History. A journey of hope.





CHAPTER 1

*“We haven’t symbolised a
battlefield as our future”*

One thing I always remember about my childhood is that we used to play battles and I always was on the rebel's side. (Thein Lwin)

Every day we had to walk to the school for almost two hours. We woke up at 4am to prepare our food. We came back home in the afternoon after another two hours walk. On the way to school, the roads were very bad; during the rainy season we could not ride our bicycles and sometimes we had to use bullock carts. We had to cross a small stream, but if it had rained a lot we could not cross it. There was no protection against the rain because the wind was always very strong. Our parents would worry if we were late. They would come to the road looking for us. But I was very eager to study. We tried very hard to get an education. (Myint Oo)

My teacher, whose name was Daw SanYe, was an inspiration. She was Pa O ethnic. She told us that there was a gap between the History we learned from the textbook at the school and the real history. She recommended reading other books, such as those written by the leader of the Burmese communist party, or about the Thirty Comrades and General Aung San, and watching movies. She was very young but very knowledgeable. I studied with her for four years until she resigned because her husband died in an incident with the army; she was devastated and quit her job. Before 1988 I was not politically engaged beyond going to lectures and reading books. I studied electronic engineering at GTN in Bago division for three years. I talked to senior students who had contacts in foreign countries and learnt about the education system. They were saying that even after graduating from GTN the education we had received was useless. In a three-year programme, minor subjects such as Burmese or political sciences occupied the first two years, even if our focus was electrical engineering. Our titles and educations were useless. Everything depended on connections rather than capacity. One of the graduates had a scholarship and gained a PHD in New

Zealand but he never got promoted because he was not a member of the BSPP party; he was actually transferred to another professional training school where students learnt to build stuff out of bamboo. Electrical engineering was a new subject at that time. Our teachers were very young, they would hang out with the students, they were very easy going, they had long hair. (Ko Kyaw Ko)

Both my parents were teachers. My mother comes from a rebel family. My father never talked about politics at all, but I remember that when I graduated from 8th grade in 1982 he told me: “I know one day you will join a resistance group. I will tell you the do’s and don’ts; there are always good and bad people, even in the resistance groups, so you always have to be careful”. Afterwards I thought it was good advice. I think he told me this because of my personality. I was always standing up for the right thing; even at the school I would fight alone against four or five students. I always stood by what I thought was correct. I always was different from other people my age. In the very early years, in 1982-1983, my friends were all Karen. We made a blood oath: we would join the resistance groups after finishing high school to fight for the rights of the Karen people. All of us got the Che Guevara image tattooed as well. (Saw Silas)

My village was very close to the KNU operated area, and the presence of KNU rebels was constant. During my childhood we were always afraid of the KNU attacks. They came often and attacked my town. I could hear the shelling on the other side of the river. One time we, the young people in the town, were asked to stand guard against KNU attacks. We only had bamboo sticks. (Moe Kyaw Oo)

I was planning to study engineering, although my parents wanted me to be a doctor because that was perhaps most respected profession in Burma then; they were quite ambitious. I had been a well-known student because I was a smart boy. Every year there was a selection of the most outstanding students. I was always the top student of my town. I was a student celebrity. (Kyaw Thura)

I studied at high school until 10th Grade. I was an outstanding student. Every year I got an award. I was always among the top three students in my class. If the 1988 uprising had not happened, I would have liked to study History. Before 1988 I knew that the political system was not good for the Burmese people and that things had to change. I saw that there were not enough teaching materials at the school, not enough medicines at the hospital, you had to have money to pay for the medicines yourself if you got sick. That was the system. There was no protection for the people. I believed that democracy would help. That was already on my mind. My mum was particularly interested in politics. My brothers in law were also involved. They were doctors, educated guys. (Thein Lwin)

My parents were not politically active, but sometimes my father would make political jokes. Sometimes he liked to talk about what was happening in the country. He said: “don’t do to the others what you would not want the others to do to you”. I understood his words later, when I learnt about human rights and democracy. He explained these things in very simple words. We had a good childhood. (Win Tin Han)

Knives,
Ploughs,
Oxen,
Paddy, and
Farms.

All of these are our lives.

- Kyauk Khae





I studied until 7th Grade. When I was 14 I left school and started working at the family farm. I saw the unfair treatment towards the farmers; for example we were forced to sell our crops to the government for a lower rate than the market price; we could not sell them to whomever we wanted. If a bag of rice cost 15 Kyat in the market, the government would only give us 5. We suffered many forms of unfair treatment. (Saw Maung Oo)

My parents worked trading rice. They were not involved in politics. I have seven brothers. I am the eldest. I studied until 10th Grade. Because I was working helping my parents making a way for my younger brothers to go to school, I attended the evening classes. History was my favourite subject. You can learn so many things from the past and take the lessons for the future. But the textbook was limited to Burmese history. I read a lot from other books. Since I was little I was particularly interested in the World Wars. (Khin Kyaw)

My political activism started when I was working in the mining project. I saw the suffering of my fellow workers and their oppression. I felt very sorry for them, but I could not do anything. I was in charge of the explosive department and I was supervising 20 workers, only one of them was a man, the rest were women, some of them as old as my own mother, or as my own sisters. They were working in a very dangerous situation; they had to carry the explosives to the top of the mountain on their heads. They had to crush the big stones to make them smaller. It was a very hard job. This was an open mine and there were many cases of tuberculosis. I got tuberculosis myself. WHO and other UN agencies were providing enough medicines to treat it, but because of corruption there was a shortage of medicines and the treatment was not for free. When I got sick I started working overtime to pay for the medicines. But the ordinary workers had no chance to make extra money and could not afford the medication. They were just waiting for death to come. After four years in the mine I returned to my township. So, when the 1988 uprising started I felt I had the opportunity to do something to end all the suffering I had witnessed. Nobody asked me to join, but it was important for me. (Ko Pouk)

I studied at the local primary school, and when I successfully finished 8th grade in 1982 I attended the BSPP's Academy for Development of National Group, which trained young people from the ethnic regions. I graduated in 1986. One of the purposes of these Institutes was to send people to the remote ethnic areas to help with development. I wanted to contribute to this and to teach small children in the communities. So, I was sent to a village in Karen State where I started working as a primary school teacher. Soon after I was promoted as head master and transferred to another village in another remote area. At that time I was both a teacher and a student. I was in the second year of my studies of Geography at the Mawlamyine University by correspondence. This was the time when I saw the human rights abuses on the local people from the Burmese army. At that time I had to travel with the military column because the area was considered conflict affected. I saw how the people in those areas were treated by the military. For example, in the rainy season the military asked the local people to give them the roof of their own houses so that they would be protected from the rain. I also saw how the army would use people the way they wanted. How drunken officials would open fire on the people just for fun. I was born in a conflict-affected area, what we call a "black area". I experienced conflict since I was very young. I saw how people around me were taken away as porters. Sometimes when fights broke around we had to hide. But at that time I believed that the Burmese army was protecting us from the KNU attacks. I thought the Burmese army was just doing their job and defending the country. But when I moved to work as a teacher I saw how brutally local people were treated. I felt very sorry for them. This was something that I did not expect to see. (Fighter Aung)



Life was good in the 50s, when I was born. After the 1962 military coup we faced many economic hardships. Farmers did not have the right to grow whichever crops they wanted but those indicated by the government; even if they wanted to grow beans the government would force them to grow sunflowers. The prices of the products were going down. At the same time repressive laws were imposed on the farmers. My mother was an educated person. After I finished high school she sent me to study at the Rangoon University. Before the academic year started the student protests over U Than's death began at the end of 1974. I joined them. I was inspired by the students, but also by my older uncles who also participated. I was 16 years old when I was detained in 1975. I started writing in prison. I wrote about my life there, mostly at night. With other prisoners we started writing a magazine. We wrote in the paper that our families had used to wrap whatever they brought us when they visited. We hid it from the guards but we could not smuggle it out of the prison. I learnt a lot about poetry and writing whilst in jail, mostly from my fellow prisoners, many of them poets and senior students. Before going to prison I didn't know I was going to be a poet. I was released on January 1979. I was around 20 years old. After I was released I returned to my hometown and focused on writing my poetry. I also set up a small bookshop. I could not return back to school due to my political involvement. They saw political activists as "trouble makers". (Ko Lwan Ni)

When I was in 8th Grade I was sent to prison for three years for distributing anti-government pamphlets. I served one and half years, between 1974 and 1976. After finishing high school I did not go to university. At that time I wanted to be someone who had power, so I thought that I would join the army academy, but later on I became aware of the injustices under the dictatorship and decided that I would rather be a rebel. I would have actually joined the revolution straight after being released from prison, but my mother told me: "please don't do it until I die", so I listened to her. (Ko Min Min)

Since I was young I loved reading all kinds of books. When I was at the university I admired Ho Chi Minh and how the Vietnamese won the war against the USA. I also admired Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. They all had a strong influence on me. But in our country many young people didn't understand them. To them Che Guevara is only a face on a t-shirt. The workers strike in June 1974 marked the beginning of my political life. At that time I was a final year student of Psychology at the Rangoon University. I was living at a boarding house at the university campus. My room number was 100. Aung Kway, a student leader during the colonial time who was the first student killed on the streets by the British government in 1920 (we still commemorate this day as a National Day) also lived in the room 100, the same room where I was living. This coincidence encouraged me spiritually. In his time the fight was against the colony. In my time, the fight was for democracy. In December 1974 the former UN Secretary General U Thant passed away. His body was taken back to Burma. The students wanted to honour him as a National Hero. He was the first Burmese in a world leader position. He played a key role during the USA/Cuba missile crisis. He was one of the fathers of peace. He came from a well-respected family. But General Ne Win didn't like him. He was jealous of him. When U Than's body arrived to Rangoon we took his coffin and brought it to the Rangoon University and buried it on the grounds of the Rangoon University Student's Union. For this action I was detained and sentenced to seven years in prison. I was released in 1979. I was detained again in 1982 and accused of being an insurgent. That time I served a two-year term and was released again in 1984. I had to finish my degree by correspondence and I graduated whilst in prison. I was in prison when my friend Ko Tin Maung O was hanged. He was the first person to be given a death sentence after Burma's Independence. I was with him on death row before he was executed. He said to us "you must continue the fight. Goodbye". (Maung Maung Taik)



I took part on the students' demonstrations when the former UIN Secretary General U Thant passed away in 1974. My sister and me were involved in fundraising, organising security etc. My sister was put in jail and I would see Maung Maung Taik when I visited her in prison. I graduated in 1977 and stayed in Rangoon. I became a businesses man. I was running a "car body workshop" as well as an ice-making factory. My first daughter was already born in 1974. The last one was born in 1987. (U Sue Htut)



I remember during the time of UThant, I was in the 5th Grade; I was nine or ten years old. I went to school and suddenly they announced that the school was closed. Years later when I came to the Rangoon University all these memories came back to me. We went to visit the places where the uprising in the 70s had happened. Everyone was sharing the information they had. We saw the pictures of the people marching... all these things got combined. (Sonny Mahinder)

Something I really liked from the university was that it was a meeting place for students from all over the country. Just by being there I was able to learn about the situation in the whole country. I had friends from many different places. Whilst studying we had to do field work during the summer break at different factories, and that gave me the opportunity to learn how factories were administered by managers coming from the army or civilians. Because I had friends affiliated with different political organisations, I could study and analyse those organisations. (Myo Win)

In our classroom we were organised the following way: first rows for Rangoon people, then Kayah people and then Chin people. So I met quite a lot of Chin students at that time. That was the first time I had Chin friends. We were introduced to Political Science. On the first year we learnt about the Burmese way to socialism. On the second year we learnt about the Constitution of the Socialist Party. We laughed and made jokes because we saw the reality and how different it was. But some kids were good students. They just wanted to be there and learn whatever they were told. They just wanted to get good grades. But we thought differently. We thought “hey what’s going on? This is the Constitution, this is the People, and this is what the authorities are doing”. I had lots of questions. We would talk about what was happening on our hometowns. I grew up in Karenni state, I knew so many things, I had seen the army helicopters, I had heard about the military operations... Sometimes we could hear the KNPP gunfire. But I did not blame them. I thought they should fight because of the harassment and bad treatment local people received from the army. I had seen these things, and we





shared our experiences with other friends. But when I talked about these things to my friends in Rangoon they did not believe it. They said these were rumours. But I told them “these are no rumours. I have seen these things with my own eyes”. (Sonny Mahinder)



ပုံနှိပ်
ကွန်ပျူတာထိန်း

အသင့်ချုပ်ဆိုရုံ
တိုက်ပုံ၊ ရုပ်စာ
လုံခြုံစွာ
ယူနိုင်မည်

Inde du Sud
2013
YAN
2013
YAN
2013



A Tree

I dig my land
With my own hands and feet.
I plough it with my own coulters.
I plant with my own seeds.
Actually, I am a tree for the world.

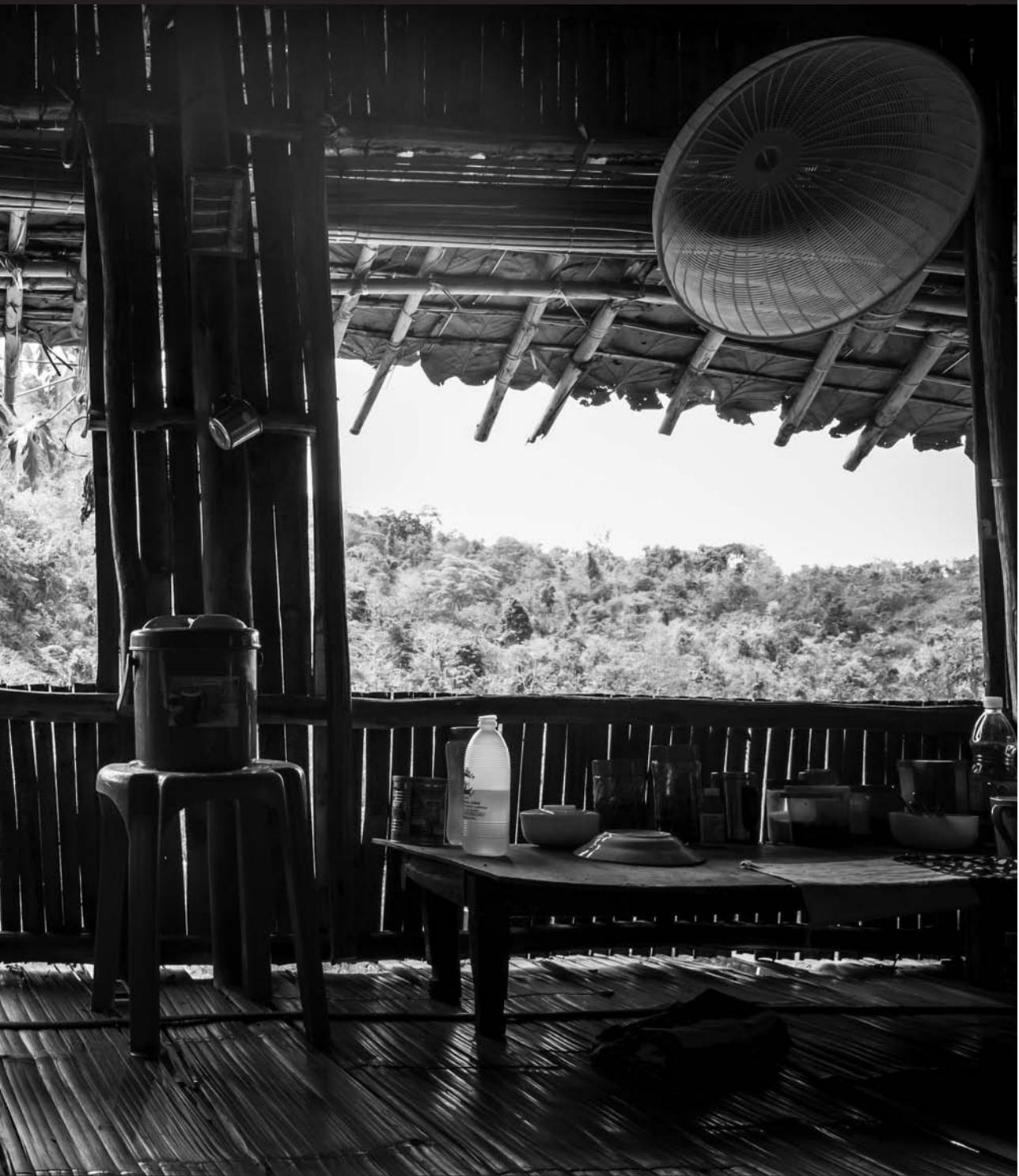
Yet I can't give shade
Upon my own country and my own land.

Set Min Nay
Vol. 1. No. 9. Nov-Dec 2001.

CHAPTER 2

*“That was the first time we
heard about ‘democracy’”*





The first student strike happened in 1988, on March 13. On that day, one student, Phone Maw, was killed in Rangoon. Afterwards, the strikes spread across the country. The government closed all the schools and universities; they thought that by, doing this, the students would be quiet. But we were not. Country students took a leading role in the uprising alongside workers and peasants. (Ko Than Khe)

On March 13, 1988, the uprising began. Many students were wounded during the riots and I accompanied some of them to the hospital. When we returned the army blocked the roads, which together with the Royal Police had the students surrounded at the university campus. The Royal Police tried to disperse the students by using water cannons as well as tear gas. We could resist the water cannons but the tear gas made us run and hide. After the tear gas subdued I went back to the campus. The army had already seized part of it. This is when I found out that Phone Maw had been killed. In order to control the news the authorities arrested everybody at the hospital, both the students and lecturers. When night came we built a memorial monument to Phone Maw using his vest stained with blood, and his slippers and some bullet shells. We stayed awake all night. The next morning we marched inside the compound, as we were not allowed to leave. We listened to the radio stations. Both the State-controlled station and the BBC wrongly stated that Phone Maw was killed by stabbing and not by shooting. This news really made us, the students, furious. We started another demonstration in the compound. At that time our only demand was to reveal the truth about Phone Maw's death. We wrote a letter saying that Phone Maw had in fact been shot dead and asked one of the university administrators to sign it. He signed because of our pressure. We made many copies of the letter and were able to distribute it at different universities as the police had reopened some roads. As a result, students from other universities came and joined us for Phone Maw's funeral. I was one of the students collecting donations for the funeral as part of the Funeral Committee. Whilst we were preparing for the funeral the army blocked the roads again with army trucks and surrounded the compound. At that time there were not many students at the compound. There

was no way out for us. After discussing we decided to remain as a group until we would be arrested. We thought that if we would run separately we would probably never see each other again. So, we decided to stick together. Luckily someone helped us to leave the compound through back roads and shortcuts. This is how we managed to escape from the surrounded compound. Soon after that the university was raided and some students were arrested. The army was looking for specific students and showing pictures of them. I was one of them. The police were showing my picture around and looking for me. A friend came and told me to run. So I decided to go back to my hometown. On March 16 there was a big demonstration in Rangoon, but I could not participate because although I was still in the city I was trying to escape. I arrived at my native town three days later, on March 19. Soon after that I received a letter saying that I had been dismissed from the university. The university reopened in June. I wanted to go and collect my belongings but was not allowed. I have never been back to Rangoon again. (Myo Win)

I got involved in the students protests after Phone Maw's killing. During the protest I had distributed leaflets and other information. On March 16 I took part in the Red Bridge protests during which police brutally cracked down on students. Nearly 100 students were killed or drowned that day. After the protests the university was closed and all of us who were from outside Rangoon were forced to return to our hometowns. When I returned home, I started mobilising people to prepare for the 8.8.88 uprising. (Ma Sue Pwint)

Our life was very simple. I studied in my village until 8th grade in 1987. I was 15 years old. The protests began in 1988. We joined the strike camp because we knew about the everyday situation Burmese people were facing. Most of us at the strike camp were students. I was the only member in my family who joined the protests. My grandfather didn't like it. My family did not want to see me being hurt; it is a normal feeling. (Chit Win)

In 1988 I joined the students uprising. We knew about the political situation in Burma and about the hardships of the people in the country. We thought the system could not bring benefits to the people and that we needed to change the political system. Most of the people in Burma were poor. We had to change the system. We had learnt about democracy whilst in university. We knew we were not living in a democratic country and we thought that we needed a real democracy in Burma. The understanding of this situation encouraged me to get involved in the students uprising. I was a member of one of the student's unions. I was not a leader but just an ordinary member doing office work for the union organising committee. (Win Tin Han)

I got a job at the Industry Ministry and got married and had two daughters. And then 1988 happened and I got involved in the activities. Even if I was a government servant I advocated among the people around me, other civil servants, to participate in the demonstrations. Everybody, students, workers, farmers, were suffering; in order to get a better future we had to fight for it. I did not get involved in the protests leadership, but I helped with organising the civil servants. At the beginning I thought the uprising would bring changes, but later on I saw how the army created chaos, so that they could have an excuse to repress the protesters. Burma was not like, for example, the Philippines' People Power movement where the army had joined the people. (Ko Min Min)

I did not get involved in the 1988 uprising. At that time I was busy being a rickshaw driver. But I heard lots of things from different people and later on I thought I should also do something to change the system. I used to help my father and I saw how when I was younger my parents could support the family

with a small amount of money. But as I grew older I saw how even if they were making more money our situation was still the same, it was not improving. I did not join the demonstrations but I went to look at them, listen to the speeches... I hung around with my friends and we discussed how the country was changing and how we wanted to take part in it. At that time I did not think it would take too long to achieve our goals. It had taken General Aung San six years to overthrow the colonizers and the Japanese, so I thought maybe we could do it in less than that. (Kyaw Kyaw)

Before 1988, I always thought that after graduation I would join the government work force and I would lead a simple life. Before the 1988 uprising I always tried to avoid politics because my family was poor and living in a remote area. They had high hopes for me, even the entire village had high hopes for me, and I wanted to keep their hopes alive. Going to university at that time was a dream. So, I avoided politics. I even did not dare to buy political books! I was being dragged by two opposing forces: my parents (and those in my village) hopes and expectations, and my desire to join the struggle. In March 1988 when Phone Maw was killed, the students protested and the university closed I went back to my village and tried to stay away from politics, although I was aware of the demonstrations happening all over the country. On August 20 1988 I decided to get involved in politics. Even though the uprising started in 8 August nothing was happening in my region. So I started organising in the nearby villages. (Ma Hnounge)

On March 16 the students were rising up. We had been waiting for a long time. I talked to the university students. We discussed what to do when the university reopened. We contacted friends all over Burma. The student leaders in Rangoon decided to set 8.8.88 as the date for the uprising. We were happy and started organising in Loikaw. During that time I was asked by the local authorities to visit them with my father. I did not know what had I done wrong. I was worried. And I got a warning from them in front of my father; the authorities said: “if he continues doing this he will be punished”. This made me even angrier! But we had to continue. On 8.8.88 we did not do anything. We just distributed some pamphlets in the city. The next day in the evening some guys went out and started shouting some slogans but I was not in that crowd. We started our strike on August 22, a bit later than in other cities, but we had to wait because ours was a black area, so we had to make sure everything was OK. On the 22 we marched, gave speeches. At the beginning we were mostly students but later on more people joined, and supported us. People were angry after the kyat devaluation in 1987. (Sonny Mahinder)

The university was closed and the authorities sent us back to our homes. Soon after I arrived we got information that the 8. 8. 88 uprising was being organised. On August 8 I was not in my village. I was farming when my friend told me that the demonstrations had started. I told my father I wanted to return to the village to participate in the demonstrations. He did not have any problem with that. So with other students we opened a strike camp at the monastery compound. The monks were very supportive. At the beginning we did not know how to organise ourselves so we went to see one of our teachers who had experience. For example, we knew about the peacock, but which colour? So our teacher drew the peacock for us. We marched from village to village shouting the same slogans that other students were shouting in the cities. At the beginning we were mostly students but afterwards many people joined us (farmers, workers, monks, even members of the police came to join us). Other people would line the streets clapping as





we marched and gave us donations to buy food. It was a very exciting time, we were very happy; we did not care if it was raining, if the roads were slippery, we marched. (Myint Oo)

On August 8 nothing happened in my town. The plan that day was to bring the high school students out. I remember waiting outside the high school but for some reason the school authorities had found out about the plan, so they shut down the school at 9am. That meant that the students inside could not get out. So nothing happened, even if many people took to the streets that day. (Kyaw Thura)

On the afternoon of August 8, 1988 demonstrators took the streets of my hometown. I did not think that was going to happen because Mudon is a business-oriented city; it is the heart of the black market. I spent the night at the strike camp. When I went back home the next morning my father was very mad at me. My family locked me in my home so that I could not go out. My grandmother was worried about me, so she came home to help my mother watch me. My mother sat by the front door and my grandmother by the back door so I could not leave the house. Ten days later they started to relax and even my younger sisters joined the demonstrations. I was not part of any strike committee at the camp but helped organise security etc. General Aung, and the way he had fought against colonialism, was a big influence to me; even during the demonstrations there was military training at the camps; our thinking was that we would make our demands peacefully and that we would only take up arms if the peaceful means did not achieve anything. (Ko Kyaw Ko)

The 1988 demonstrations started in my township on August 9 rather than on August 8. Moe Thee Zun, the student leader, wrote me a letter. We were from the same township. On August 9 we went to the school very early in the morning. At the beginning only 20 or so students came and we marched to another high school and more students joined and so on. By 8.30am the group had grown and it had become a very big protest. I was at the front of the demonstration. We knew the army was positioned at a junction waiting for us, and I tried to avoid meeting them, but the crowd wanted to meet the army. When we arrived we saw a light tank in front of us. They opened fire and three people were killed on the spot. The demonstration became chaotic. We retreated back and some of the demonstrators took over the local police station. The protesters could no longer be controlled. On August 26, my colleagues and I went to see Aung San Suu Kyi's first public speech at Shwedagon pagoda in Rangoon. There were so many people. Sometimes we could not even hear her voice! When we came back we decided to open a strike camp in our township. At that time we believed in people's power and mass movement. That day I was elected chairperson of the ABFSU at my high school. The vice chairperson did not accept the elections result and called for a repetition of the process. We had to repeat the elections three times, and the three times I won, so he finally accepted the outcome. (Aung Win Tin)

I did not take any significant position during the protests. I thought the university students discriminated against people like me, they bullied us. One day the leaders of the protests in my town told us that since we were in the process of forming different committees in the strike camp they needed to know who was who. They asked all the university students and all the high school students to form two separate groups. But there were several of us who did not join any group. So they were very surprised. I still remember their faces. They asked us “who are you?” “We already graduated from high school but have yet to go to university”. I finally joined the information committee, but I felt bad with this division they created. (Kyaw Thura)

We formed a strike camp. There were students and workers, we lived together. The camp was huge. I could not say how many people were there. I was responsible for collecting food, for making sure that all the students had something to eat. I also had to make sure that the food was not poisoned. There were different ways to see if the food was safe to eat. Sometimes we squeezed lemon over the rice. If there were bubbles it meant it could not be eaten. Or we asked where the food came from: had someone brought it anonymously? I was also responsible for fundraising. I was part of the security team at night too! People at the strike camp were very active. They wanted to demonstrate every day. But daily demonstrations were very hard to organise. So we tried to march once every two days. (Moe Kyaw Oo)

The university closed in March 1988 because of the demonstrations in Rangoon. It was briefly opened and then closed again in June. Some of my friends in Rangoon sent me the pamphlets they were distributing and we copied them by hand to share among the students by night. At that time there were no photocopy machines. The pamphlets talked about Phone Maw, about General Aung San’s letters to Ne Win, and also included some news, rumours etc. On the morning of 8. 8. 88 there were no big demonstrations in Henzada, just some small gatherings near some schools. By nighttime I received a phone call saying that one protest had started somewhere in my hometown. I took a trishaw and went there. Little by little the crowd grew bigger. We marched to the police station and demanded the police to release two students from Rangoon who had been arrested that morning but they refused. We kept marching and arrived

at a Buddhist monastery. There were many students studying there. The abbot did not allow them to join but they decided to jump the fence and join us. We marched back to the police station and demanded the release of our fellow students again, but the police opened fire. They said it was just to scare us, but they shot directly at us. Luckily no one was hurt. We dispersed and took refuge at the monastery. That night I did not go back home. We demonstrated and marched for two days. On the third day I went back home. Whilst I was eating my mum came and asked me: "Please, think. Are you going to carry on until the end, or are you just following what others are doing? If you don't think you will be committed until the end, please stop now and stay at home. Don't just follow what other people do. Make your own decisions." I thought about it and decided I would go on until the end. I think my mother knew that if I joined the demonstrations I would probably not finish my education; maybe she wanted to make sure that I knew what I was doing. My father did not say anything. He just said I was an adult now, so I could make my own decisions. I was the only member of my family who joined the demonstration. We decided to found the student's union in our town. I was in charge of the accounts. We overtook High School No. 1 and decided to use it as a strike camp for the student's union. At that time we thought we would manage to topple the military government. We thought we would get a better government. At that time the military camp was four miles out of town and the city administration was in the hands of the students. There were two strike camps: the student's one and the general camp. We would collaborate with each other, meet with each other but our identity as students was important. In early September, before the military coup, the Student's Union Chairperson and I travelled to Rangoon and briefly met with Aung San Suu Kyi. It was a short meeting because there was a long queue of people waiting to talk with her. We explained about our town and the situation there. She gave us her direct phone number and asked us to call her if something happened. (Ko Aung Htun)

Until August 9 nothing happened in my hometown. The protests were organised by the high school students. I followed them. That day the police opened fire against the demonstrators and one of them was killed on the spot. There were no more demonstrations until August 24 once the Martial Law was lifted. Until the military coup took place, there were protests in the streets organised every day. (Min Zaw)

There was contact between my fellow '75 Generation members and we decided to join the students under their leadership to show our support. Some days after August 8 I left Rangoon and went back to my hometown to set up the strike committee that would organise the protests there. Oil workers formed the main mobilization of people in my hometown. They have a history of anti-government protests since the colonial period. They were the main force behind the demonstrations in Min Bu. Workers, students and farmers formed the strike committee. I was in charge of information. People were really hopeful at that time. They believed that they would achieve democracy during the course of the demonstrations. But on the other hand people were aware of the possibility of a military coup. That's why when some people were giving speeches to the public, others were undertaking military training in the strike camp. At that time the army was not involved in the demonstrations. Lots of incidents happened in different towns at that time. There was no order but chaos at that time. That made me realise that the possibility of achieving political change was smaller as time passed. On September 18 1988 the military coup took place and all hope vanished. We had time to prepare unlike in other places where the strike camps were cracked down upon immediately after the coup. As soon as we started hearing marching songs being played on the radio we knew the coup had taken place. We organised a retreat. We closed the camp and the offices; we kept our profile low, for example myself and some of my friends went to hide in nearby villages. (Ko Lwan Ni)

In 1988 I organised the students in my mum's village. We were over one hundred. We marched and participated in the uprising. I understood about the situation, it was very difficult. My mother and father told me about it. One of my older sisters was also part of the student's movement. At that time I was very excited about seeing the students coming together, but on the other hand I also worried because there were different groups and I feared that there could be some disagreements between the students. But it was fine. No disagreement happened. During the demonstration time the local government was quite friendly to the protesters; they were very supporting. But after the military coup they totally changed. They were no longer friendly. I do not know why they changed. (Mya Win)

My community was a farmer's community. We were obliged to sell our crops to the government authorities for a price lower than the market rate. The government could also take the land away at any time. We always had to please the government authorities so that they would not take the land from us. That is why I decided to join the protests. I was one of the demonstration leaders. We were in charge of organising the farmers and explaining to them that once we reached democracy, oppression from the government would end. I had worked on the fields so I knew the farmers. But also, the farmers themselves knew how the government had treated them, unfairly, so they joined not just in my village but also in other towns. When the coup took place I was at the strike camp. My mother told me: "you should hide somewhere, you should avoid arrest" because the army was arresting people. All of us who were involved in the demonstrations were trying to find a way to hide but there was nowhere for us. The military was everywhere. (Nay Myo Htike)

In my township the anti-government demonstrations started around August 22, 1988, later than in other parts of Burma. I got involved in organising the demonstrations because I didn't like the system. For instance, Loikaw was considered a "brown area"; there were not enough school teachers, medical services were very basic, there was a lot of harassment from the military, all sorts of things happened on a daily basis. I had heard about the protests that had started in August 8. That was the first time we heard about "democracy"; at that time we did not know exactly what it meant but we knew what we saw in our everyday reality. (Tim Maung Tum)

In 1988 I was not a student anymore, but I joined the demonstrations. I was very involved. During that time students came to my house for meetings. My sister participated in the demonstrations; she was very strong politically. Because we were part of a well respected family the high-ranking officers knew my father. Students felt safe at our house. I was 37 years old at that time; I was an adult compared to the students. I had to make sure they did not go for violence. For instance the chairman of Paan Township was my brother in law. At that time there were lots of attacks, lootings on government-related buildings. They asked me to help preventing them. Government officials gave me the keys to their buildings and cars. Both the students and the government trusted me. There were two protest groups in my town; students formed one, and township



people formed the other. I was asked to lead the latter group. I could mediate between the demonstrators and the government and there was no looting, no violence. No buildings were set on fire in my hometown. (U Sue Htut)

All our family members were involved in the uprising in our township. My mother was the first speaker leading the crowds. My elder brother was one of the student leaders at the Rangoon Institute of Technology. He was arrested by the military intelligence. I was also very actively participating in the uprising in Mandalay. I was 22 years old. So in 1988 we were all involved in the democratic uprising. (Ko Than Khe)





I joined the 1988 uprising with very little knowledge about democracy. Actually I first learnt the word “democracy” during the protests. We have learnt new concepts over these years: “human rights”, “conflict transformation”, “conflict resolution”. These words did not even exist in our dictionary. When I joined the ABSDF I was under 18. I was a child soldier according to the UN definition, but I was a voluntary child soldier. (Kyaw Thura)

I was the only member of my family that took part in the 1988 demonstrations. The whole country was protesting and participating in the uprising but in my village (formed by around 300 households) nobody dared to go outside. So three of us started the demonstration and then the whole village joined. Then the coup happened. Although we had been presenting our demands peacefully the government reacted with violence. So armed struggle was our only option. The night of the military coup the police opened fire in front of my house but I was hiding. I decided to leave that same night without telling my family. My family was questioned afterwards. (Saw Maung Oo)

In 1988 students had decided to follow three main strategies: one was to carry on with semi underground activities. For that purpose the ABSFU was formed. The second strategy was to form a legal political party, which was DPNS, and the third was to engage in the armed struggle through the ABSDF. Whilst I was working for the DPNS I was constantly watched by the military intelligence. Even if the three organisations looked different their essence was the same. In 1995 I said to everyone I was going to work in development projects in remote areas and left to join the ABSDF. I was 33 years old. (Ko Pouk)

Newly born

You should watch me,
Crooked tyrant!!
My fury
Will not bow down
Under the military boots.
That is my faith in blood.

The haze will disappear
with the sunrise,
And you will see a new country
which I want to build.

Khine Htet
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CHAPTER 3

“Jail or Jungle”

I joined the 1988 uprising as an ordinary student. Imagine you have a household of ten people and all of them work and earn money, but even all this money is not enough to feed the family. That happened in every household in Burma. The 1988 unrest was a chance for the people to express their frustration. At that time we believed we would achieve democracy through the demonstrations. That was the most popular uprising in Burma's history; people of all walks of life participated, including soldiers, students, workers.... We really believed the government would listen to the people. Then on September 18 1988, the coup happened and destroyed our hopes. But it did not stop the commitment to the struggle for democracy. It actually gave us the idea of what to do next, it showed us the available option: taking the arms. There were two reasons for this choice: one was seeing how violently the army had crushed the peaceful demonstrations. They had the guns and we had to fight against them using the same means. Reason number two was the existence of the already well-established ethnic resistance armed groups, who had been fighting against the Burmese military for self-determination for a long time. I knew quite a lot about the ethnic resistance groups already because the area where I lived was not far from the Burmese Communist Party controlled area, and the Karenni resistance groups. I knew how the ethnic nationalities had taken to armed struggle and fighting. (Khin Kyaw)



After the coup we thought there were only 2 options for us as students: if we continued to work politically inside Burma, one day we would have to go to jail; if we left home and joined the revolution resistance movement, we



had to go to the jungle without knowing when we would be able to come back. There were only two options: jail or jungle. These are politics in Burma. Students had to choose between these two options if we wanted to continue with the political struggle. Some students continued working secretly inside the country with the students union. Others decided to join political parties. Our thinking was that in order to change the system we needed an armed

resistance movement; we needed enough pressure. That's why we had to go to look for armed assistance. That was our thinking at the time: which path we had to choose? (Ko Than Khe)

I was arrested by military intelligence on March 17, 1988, at Rangoon University, leading to my dismissal by the authorities. I was arrested but was not sent to prison. They released me but I started to be followed. My dad's friend sent a message to my mum saying that I was going to be arrested again. I only had two choices: either move to another country as an illegal migrant worker, or go to the "protected" or liberated area. I could not survive in Burma. I had seen how my father, after joining politics, was banned from doing any business. He was blacklisted. I had this experience. So I asked my dad for advice: "what should I do?" I thought I should take arms against the government. I felt I was already dead. I could go to Rangoon but I would not be able to do any business; how was I going to survive? This is what I discussed with my dad. I did not want to become an illegal, so I chose to take up arms against the government. I don't like violence, I don't like war, but I did not have any choice. How would we get our demands? Who pushed me to join the armed struggle? The military government and the dictatorship, they pushed us to go. They would not recognise us if we did not hold guns. I decided to leave Rangoon and go to the jungle. I felt confident; I felt that was the right decision. (Salai Yaw Aung)

There were two main sources of inspiration for me at that time: even if I was older than many of those around me, the students inspired me and helped me endure all the hardship; their activism inspired me. Also the ethnic people were another source of motivation. The more inside we went, the more support we got. Before I knew the armed struggle, I had read about the ethnic armed resistance and how they were fighting for their rights. I knew that their struggle was right, that it was justified. I knew about their suffering at the hands of the Burmese army. But before I arrived in the ethnic area I felt nervous. For example, after I reached Mawlamyine I threw my civil servant card into the river so that nobody knew about it. In 1988, the ABSDF had the full support of the people inside Burma, as well as the NLD, which was born from the students' uprising. This support was important for me. After the coup

the government said that they would hold free elections, but when afterwards they refused to recognise the NLD victory, we at the ABSDF understood that the armed struggle really was the only option for us. In 1989 Ko Moe Thee Zun also joined the resistance group. More people focused on the armed struggle. (Ko Min Min)

I participated in the August 1988 nation-wide uprising. In my student union there was an agreement: “OK, if shouting slogans and marching along the streets does not bring our demands, we will resort to other means, we will take up arms”. Because of this decision we had already started communicating with the ethnic armed groups. We sent the first batch of students to be trained (in the armed struggle) into the Mon area, but they had not arrived at their destination when the military coup took place. The shooting in Tavoy started one day later (September 19). That was the day I left my hometown. I left not because I could not stay at home any longer, but because of the decision we had taken: to take other means to continue the struggle. (Myo Win)

After the military coup on September 18, one Burmese military officer called a meeting at a monastery with the students from my town. He said: “OK, now the military has taken power, so no more protests will be allowed. Come back to your normal life and we won’t make any arrests”. But the students did not accept this, they said: “we have to go to the jungle and take up the armed struggle”. They started leaving the town. My mother told me: “son, you are responsible for them, you should accompany them and convince them to come back”. This is how I followed them. Afterwards many of them returned but I was the one who stayed! Seven hundred people left my town. My wife and daughters stayed back. At the beginning my wife did not support my decision, but later on she understood. (U Sue Htut)

The day the coup took place I decided to leave. I did not want to be arrested. I knew that if I was arrested I could not fight against them or resist them. So I thought I would rather join the armed resistance. (Moe Kyaw Oo)

After the military coup the government started arresting those who were involved in the demonstrations. In one of his speeches, General Ne Win said:

“we will not shoot at the air, we will shoot at you”. We had been peacefully calling for democracy but we were unsuccessful. So, I thought we had to try other means. I decided to leave Burma and join the armed struggle. I was 24 years old. (Fighter Aung)

When the coup happened we discussed amongst the camp leaders, but also with the abbot, and we decided we had to go to the jungle. Many high school students wanted to join us but we disagreed; we told them “no, you cannot come to the liberated areas with us, we will comeback soon with the guns, we will bring the guns for you”. (Myint Oo)

After the coup all the civil servants were called in and asked about their opinions of the coup. We were given a list of questions about the new government that we had to answer. I thought that I did not want to go back to prison again, and I believed that the armed struggle was necessary. I knew the ABSDF had been formed, so I decided to join. I left on December 11, 1988. I did not tell my wife I was leaving. Later on she heard rumours that I had been killed in action. My house was registered by the authorities after I left. (Ko Min Min)

After the military coup, the core group of organisers left for the border and joined the resistance movement. As I was not well known I stayed at my village until 1991 when I joined the ABSDF. There was a lot of oppression and abuse by the army: we were forced to work for free in the government projects, even if we were very poor and needed to work for a living. Every household had to guard the government buildings. There were very hard punishments for those who did not comply. I could not bear it. So, I decided to join the resistance movement. I did not inform my family of my plans to leave. I did not even tell my friends. But later on I found out that the authorities questioned my friends when I left. And also my friend’s families were forced to relocate to another village because of me leaving. (Thant Zin)

I did not tell my father directly that I was leaving, but he knew it anyway. He said to me: “don’t let your mother know about this”. When I went to take the bus to leave Mudon my father came to the bus station by bicycle and checked if I was there. He would cycle around looking for me. My mother came to visit me three years ago. I told her that at that time my father did not allow me to tell her that I was going to leave, but she did not believe me, she said “it is not possible”. Until he died he did not tell that to his wife. I spoke to my younger brother as he was the only other son. We agreed that I would leave and that he would stay with the family. My brother in law also wanted to come but I also told him he should stay. We had an agreement within the family. (Ko Kyaw Ko)

My elder brother and I decided we needed to leave. The two brothers together decided to leave family and home and go to the border to join the revolution. We discussed with our parents and they agreed. They thought it was the right decision and agreed with our demand. But one thing they said was: “if you choose this way you have to endure all the hardship along the journey. It is not going to be easy. It is not going to be like walking through a rosy road. You cannot see the time when you can come back again. You should not betray the struggle. Along the journey you must stick to your principles, you have to choose the right way, even if you face many difficulties, please be honest.” Only these things my parents asked of us. So we decided they had allowed us to join the revolution. One week after we left home my father was thrown into jail because he was serving as the vice chairman of the township local committee during the uprising. My mother was forced to transfer very far away, to a deserted area. My younger brother was dismissed from the university. Only the two younger ones remained at the house and could continue their studies at high school. The whole family suffered a lot. (Ko Than Khe)

My father tried to stop me from leaving. He told me: “if you go, if you join the revolution, you will face lots of difficulties and hardships”. My father was an underground member of the PPP (Peoples Patriotic Party). He knew how many hardships I would face and that if I left and ever contacted them again they would be punished. That’s why my mother, although she didn’t know that I was leaving, said to me: “if you go do not come back”. My father was a taxi driver and my mother worked selling commodities. I have an older sister. Both

my parents passed away already, but I only found out five years ago. I have not had contact with my sister until last year. (Khin Maung Win)

I went to say goodbye to my mother and she told me: “you are a man now. Don’t come back until you don’t accomplish your objectives”. Later on the army went to visit her and asked her to help them bring her son back, but she always refused. (Thein Lwin)

I do not know what changed but I realised I had to make a decision. I decided to leave. I did not have time to say goodbye, but I was able to meet with my family one year later when I returned home secretly. Of course, my mum was crying, I have never gone back. (Mya Win)

In 1993 I joined ABSDF Northern. I did not have the opportunity to say goodbye to my family. They knew I was hiding but they did not know that I had gone to the jungle. At that time my father was in the late stages of prostrate cancer, but I did not say anything to him. I was 23 years old. (Ma Hnounge)

I left as part of a group of 200, formed mostly by students and young people from the village. The same happened all over Burma. Thousands of people were on their way to join the armed struggle. We felt very excited. Nobody knew how hard the journey would be. (Saw Maung Oo)

I remember that on the way to the border I was told how a group of twenty students had met with a unit from the NMSP (New Mon State Party). They were carrying a wounded soldier on a hammock. He had stepped on a land mine and they were returning him to the border area. The students helped the NMST to carry him. They had to cross a very high mountain, and it took them three days to reach the summit. It was very difficult and



exhausting. The students had not even reached the border and they already got a glimpse of what was waiting for them. (Min Zaw)

Before we left the monastery to go to the jungle we did what General Aung San and the Thirty Comrades had done, we took a blood oath in front of the abbot. Then we left the monastery. We crossed a range of mountains and arrived at a Karen area. Then we crossed a river, and a big road; we passed many villages, mostly Karen. Then we saw one KNU (Karen National Union) soldier. He welcomed us very warmly and took us to a monastery where we could rest and eat. That was my first experience with their food. It was very different. They gave us sesame paste instead of fish paste. Their rice was very hot. We had no experience. But we tried because that was our decision; we had to carry on. I had lost my shoes on the way. My feet were very painful. The KNU soldiers told us we had to go to their headquarters, which were very far away. After one week we arrived. It was a hazardous journey because we had to avoid the Burmese army. We used to stay in monasteries during the night. Every Karen village has one monastery. We wrote our names at the monastery blackboards, so that the students who were following us knew that we had been there. We wrote our names under the names of those ahead of us. Seeing those names encouraged us. When we arrived, there were already many students from different places from all over Burma. When we saw it we were so happy, so satisfied. They were people like us. That gave us more energy. We made new friends. We would ask them where they were from, from which university and we shared information about the uprising. We heard from the radio that there were students arriving at other areas such as Kachin. We did not feel tired! We all thought the same: "if we get the guns we will come back to our villages and towns and fight against the government authorities". We all thought that we would be back soon with guns. The KNU set up three camps for us. I stayed in one of them. They gave me shoes. (Myint Oo)

I left as part of a group of 21 people, the leaders of the strike camp. We were all men. It took us four days to reach the KNU camp. On our way to the border we passed by one village. When they heard us speaking Burmese the whole village went quiet. Even the animals stopped making noises. They hid all the food. They thought we were soldiers from the army. As I speak a little

bit of Karen I communicated with them and they gave us food. You could see how scared they were. I imagined how brutally the Burmese government had treated the people in that area. (Moe Kyaw Oo)

Before the military coup took place, leaders from the Students Union had travelled the country organising the students. They also came to my hometown. So when the coup took place I, together with another person, was assigned to go to Rangoon, get arms and come back. One of my contacts in Rangoon was originally from Mon State. He was a singer. His father was willing to take him to the border. So the two of us, together with his father, travelled to the Mon controlled area, which was very close to their hometown. We arrived to what is called the 3 borders region. A Unit formed by Mon female soldiers was already there. That was the first time I met the Mon armed resistance. (Min Zaw)

I don't remember my journey to the camp! I took us around ten days. It was very tough. The Burmese army was following us, so we had to move very fast. Keeping up with the rest of the group was very hard for me. I can't remember how many mountains we crossed! After we crossed one, my friends would try to cheer me up by saying: "only one more to go" but there was always another bigger one. After two or three mountains I stopped believing them. I really admired the female members of the ABSDF. They were medics and therefore did not carry guns but sacks of rice. When we stopped and whilst the men were resting the women would go and check how everyone was doing. (Ma Hnounge)

We travelled for a long time. It took us two weeks to reach the KNU area. It was a difficult journey. We were about to cross one river when the government militia got information and came looking for us; we ran to a nearby sugar plantation to hide. From there we saw a girl from a neighbouring village go to the river to collect water. The militia shot and killed her. Later one of my friends drowned when we tried to cross the river. It was an unlucky journey. When we left our hometown we were very strong, but we travelled for a long time and by the time we arrived to the KNU controlled area, we were very tired. (Chit Win)





After the coup, students started arriving at the KNU outpost. I went to pick up some of them. We had prepared for their arrival. There was some basic makeshift accommodation. The meals were prepared at a nearby local market to avoid someone poisoning the food. Thousands of students arrived. I decided to stay. Almost all my friends with whom I had taken the blood oath were there; they were all Karen. I remember that one senior Karen officer came to see us and asked us what we wanted to do. She said we had different options; we could join different KNU departments, such as forestry, customs and, of course, the military department. We all said we wanted to fight. She asked us to think about it for one week. When she came back we all repeated that we wanted to take up the arms. From my group of friends (10 of us in total) only two of us stayed with the ABSDF. The rest joined the KNU. Before 1988 we had this idea of fighting for the rights of the Karen people. But then the students uprising happened and broadened the scope of the fight for me. I wanted to fight for all Burmans. And I also considered myself a student; I was planning to join the university. The sound of the peacock was in my blood! Of my friends who joined the KNU, some were killed in the battle and some of them were wounded. (Saw Silas)

Around fifty students from other places were already at the camp when we arrived. They were building some makeshift shelters. The KNU had created a reception group to welcome the students. There was a doctor, a registration area... When I arrived I felt very nervous. The image of the “rebels” I had in my mind was very different from what I found in reality. For instance, we had left with some money but by the time we reached the camp we had run out of money. Some of us did not have shoes. The Karen people who were selling





in the market gave us whatever we needed. They were very warm and kind to the students. After I arrived at the camp I really missed my family. I often dreamed about them. But the first concern was malaria. Everyone got sick. Two students died of malaria on the same day. I thought maybe I would die too. The weather was very hot and that made the malaria worst. Some of the girls that had come with us were crying. Everything was very chaotic. Maybe there was not enough medication. Our camp had the highest malaria death toll amongst all the camps along the border. When someone died we tried to

perform a funeral the best way we could. The problem was that there was no Buddhist monk in the area. Only some Christians, as it was a Christian area. We could not do it according to the Buddhist rites. There were two novice monks in my group but they were disrobed during our trip to the border because it was too much for them! By the time we arrived to the camp they were no longer monks! (Moe Kyaw Oo)

When we left we didn't have any contacts. We just followed the black market road with the hope that somehow we would find the rebels in the jungle; we had no idea where we were going. Three days after we found some KNU soldiers and they told us that some student groups had already arrived at one of their outposts. This convinced us that we had made the right decision. We walked for 13 days until we reached the KNU area. The KNU received us very well; with a lot of respect. It was much better than what we had imagined. Later on I spoke with the KNU people and they told me that when the uprising occurred in Burma, they expected the students would come, that's why they had prepared: they had stocked clothes, food etc. (Khin Kyaw)

We arrived at a Mon district camp on October 4. The camp commander asked us if we wanted to join the NMSP or the students. Of course the students! So he took us to the place where other students who had already arrived were staying. We thought there would be many of them but what we saw were only several in four almost empty barracks, one of them about to collapse. Nothing was happening. I thought, since we were in a military camp, we would be sleeping on bunk-beds equipped like soldiers in the war movies we had seen, but it wasn't even close to what I had imagined. The bed we were provided was just the floor of the barrack. (Kyaw Thura)

After we stepped off the train we met a NMST column. They took us to the border. It took two weeks to reach it. We travelled sometimes by boat, sometimes by foot. I remember there was a very high mountain. We started climbing it at the very early morning and only reached the top by the evening. There was no water and we were all so tired that we could not even talk. One female student died of exhaustion at the top of the mountain. We had never experienced something like that before. Even the NMST members were

discouraging us. They said: “you do not even have arms. How are you going to fight back?” or they would lie to us: “Aung San Suu Kyi’s brother is already at the border, he is waiting for you with a big pile of guns”. We were so angry. So many people had been killed when the army crashed the strike camps after the coup. That anger was still inside us and that was what kept us going, it made us continue walking. We were the first group to reach the Three Borders Pass. We thought that it would only take us 15 days... we would arrive, get the guns, return back, and fight. I was nineteen years old at that time but I was not among the youngest in the group. Some of the people were much younger than me. We realised there were no guns waiting. There was nothing but malaria. Many people left. Some parents came to take their sons and daughters back. My uncles also came to see me, but I did not return. My friends had been killed in the streets. I wanted to fight back, even if it was not easy. That was the political understanding I had taken from my brothers in law. When you are a student you can relax, you don’t need to worry, you don’t need to think. But once you reach the border you have to be mature. In Burma I was just a student, but when we reached the border I became one of the camp deputy officers, I had responsibilities. But it was a very tough time for the students. Ten people died due to malaria, food was scarce. We had only banana, papaya and pumpkins to eat. People sold whatever possessions they had to buy food. (Thein Lwin)

In 1988 the uprising found me in Bangkok. I had signed off from my previous job and was looking for another one. After one month in Bangkok I flew to Singapore and I saw that Singapore was even more developed than Thailand. From Singapore I travelled to Malaysia by train. From the train I saw how the peasants working the fields lived. They had TVs in their homes. A motorcycle parked at the gate, sometimes even a car. And I wondered, “why is this happening? How can it be that peasants in Burma, which is richer in terms of resources, live so poorly? Why is Burma so different? Maybe there is something wrong. Maybe there is a problem with the government”. When I read that many students and other people had gone to the border areas I thought I could also do something for my country. I did not know if the students had any military experience. Since I had done military training, I thought I should go with them and help them; I thought this was how I could

contribute to my country. That was my duty. So I decided to go to the border and join the ABSDF. I travelled from Bangkok to Mae Sot. I had a friend there who was a KNU member and when I told him I wanted to join the students he arranged for me to go to one of their camps. At that time the ABSDF had not been formed yet. There were around 500 students and other people at the camp when I arrived. When I met them they were full of hope. They thought that everything was going to be very easy and very quick: get the guns, the military training, come back inside Burma, fight and win. But I knew it was not going to be easy to get guns, and without training it is very difficult to know how to use them. On November 1988, the ABSDF was formed and we set up one regiment there. I went to talk to the KNU about the possibility of providing military training to the students and they agreed. (Wai Linn Zin)

We finally arrived to the Thay-Baw-Boe camp. I was so happy! I saw lots of people like me! Of course my life changed completely: food, living conditions... But I was content with this new life. It was an opportunity to do something. (Min Khant)

I travelled with my first wife and my son to the ABSDF headquarters in Weigyi. The ABSDF that I had in my imagination, and the ABSDF that I found when we arrived to Weigyi were the same. The students were very warm, and kind with each other. They were like a family. Even if they were very young I felt they were very mature. I felt I had made the right decision. (Ko Pouk)

I left with a group of 17 or 18 students. We arrived at the KNU Brigade No. 7 area. When we arrived I felt I had become part of the struggle; I felt I had joined history. (Fighter Aung)

Our plan was to just arrive to the camp, get the guns and comeback. We thought we would be done in three days! But getting to the border alone took us eleven days. Yes, when we arrived there we saw guns but were the KNU soldiers that carried them... My life totally changed. I was very young at that time. I was not even a man yet. I grow up in the jungle. I had to endure a lot. (Nay Myo Htike)



Pass through in the ABSDF

We haven't symbolised a battlefield
As our future.

But the future
Rather creates, selects and offers
A battlefield to us.

Maung Lwan Ni
7. 7. 2002
Vol. 2. No. 2. Oct-Nov 2002.

CHAPTER 4

*“The ABSDF has been a
lifetime experience”*

When we were on the way to the border area we were worried other students would have already arrived and grabbed the guns. We thought we were late. “We have to go fast, hurry up, hurry up!” When we reached the Thaw Baw Poe camp, in the KNU area, we realized there was nothing. Even the camp was hardly set. We thought that we would arrive, get military training, get arms, comeback and topple the government. We would be done in six months, or one year maximum. But even after the military training there were no sign of guns. We were frustrated. We only thought about fighting. So we went to see the KNU officer and he patiently explained us that the struggle would take time. Some people started returning back home, even one of my cousins came to visit me and asked me to come back. I did not want to return empty handed. I thought: “Ok, maybe it will take us longer, maybe three years”. (Ko Kyaw Ko)

Our new life was very difficult. We had health problems, there was very little food, and the available food was new and strange. I understood my new life better each month, better each day. I looked at how the local people ate and I did the same, how they slept and I did the same. Some of my friends returned back. From the group of seven that left together I was the only one who stayed over the years. (Mya Win)

When I arrived at the Indian border, my life changed completely. I do not know how to express it. Before I left I had read many books about the struggle for independence in Burma, about the difficulties of the underground life and the armed struggle. I knew I was going to face difficulties but could not imagine life was going to be so hard. Reading about it and living it was completely different. Even if we were young, before reaching the age of 30 we all had white hair, high blood pressure, a lot of stress. When we arrived we were very active, we wanted to continue our struggle, but our situation and our expectations were totally different. At the beginning the Indian government did not want to recognise us, but they finally did and accepted Burmese students and activists in their refugee camps. But they did not allow us to leave the camps, because the political situation in that area was very complicated.



There were many insurgent groups in Manipur State and they were worried about our safety. But keeping us in the camps made the communication among ourselves even more difficult. It was very hard. We were locked in the camps. We felt very sad. We had left Burma to continue our struggle with the help of the Indian government. We had information from Rangoon and Mandalay; the Indian embassies there had contacted the students' leaders in Rangoon and suggested they go to India. Mr Rajiv Gandhi welcomed us, accepted us in India. We thought that we would arrive and the helicopters would be waiting for us and they would take us to the military training... it was from these kinds of messages that we decided to leave for India, but when we arrived we found another situation. There was a lot of misinformation. Sometimes we felt that we had been put in isolation camps. We were not happy. (Ko Thura)

I was very hopeful at that time. I thought we would be able to implement our plans. But we faced many difficulties. We were not well equipped to fight. The early days were very difficult. We ate twice a day, and even these two meals were not good enough. We often did not have enough food. When I arrived, there were many problems at the camp because it was formed by people from different townships. We were all very different. So, instead of focusing on the real objectives of our struggle I had to concentrate on solving the internal problems in the camp. For example; there were four hundred people in the camp. We were only given rice and a bag of fish paste and chillies for every meal. So, to feed the four hundred of us we had to mix the fish paste and the chillies with water to make soup so that people could at least taste the fish paste. Cooking was done in rotation, so my platoon had to take care of cooking from time to time. When it came to the food distribution people would try to favour those from their area. That was one of the problems I had to solve every single day, every single meal. No wonder we were not able to win the struggle in three months as we thought we would! A happy memory from that time is the way we, students were welcomed by the locals when we arrived in the jungle at the Thai/Burma border. They had very little but treated us with great care. (Myo Win)

We have many feelings inside. Some of them we need to keep, we cannot tell them to anyone because they have already past. I never thought the struggle would last 24 years. When we arrived at the camps no one had any experience in setting an army. Everyone was a leader, there were so many leaders! I thought OK, calm down. One day you would be the camp leader, the next day another person would be. After that I thought: OK, I do not think we can achieve our objectives in three months... maybe six months, and after, maybe one year, two years, three years... not 24 years!" I am really grateful to the KNU; they were the ones introducing us to the army life. They gave us military training. They explained to us what is important in an army: discipline, obedience, order and responsibility. (Salai Yaw Aung)

The Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) helped us open the students' camp in the Huay Pon Long area, which used to be a KNPP headquarters. During the first one or two months I realised that even if we

were all fighting against the military regime, there were many internal issues around: for instance, the military trainer was a Karenni from the KNPP whilst most of us (the students) came from Kayah and Shan States. He was fine with the students from Kayah but not with those coming from other regions. Many people were not politically mature and would favour people from the same region. These tensions among the people were very sad to see. People had left their families and loved ones to join the cause, and I felt that we were all one family now so everyone should be treated as member of the same family. I tried to mediate in the disputes and to inform the camp leadership of what was going on, but there were strong protocols in place at that time, so if you were not a member of the Camp Committee you were not allowed to go to the camp office, it was a very hierarchical structure. I tried to talk to one or two camp leaders, but being a girl and being young they did not take me seriously. One morning, around four hundred students decided to leave the camp, not just because of these internal problems, but also because the military training, the illnesses and malaria were taking a toll on them. (Ma Sue Pwint)

Life in the camps was not easy. The biggest challenge was malaria. I was almost dying. Food was also scarce and of poor quality. Only determination and commitment kept us alive. (Fighter Aung)

After I arrived to the camp I really missed my family. I often dreamt about them. But the first concern was malaria. Everyone got sick. Two students died of malaria on the same day. I thought maybe I would die too. The weather was very hot and that made the malaria worst. Some of the girls that had come with us were crying. Everything was very chaotic. Every one got sick and we were just helping each other. Maybe there was not enough medication. Our camp had the highest death toll of malaria among all the camps along the border. (Moe Kyaw Oo)

We arrived at the KNPP headquarters camp in September 1988. We were the first students. We had to wait quite a long time before we got military training. We said to the KNPP “give us guns, we want to fight”, but they always responded, “no, it does not work like that. Revolution takes time, you have to organise”. The more students that came, the harder life in the camp

became in terms of food and shelter. It was a time for testing how strong we were. That was the hardest time. Between September, when we arrived at the KNPP headquarters, and November, when the military training started, more than half of the students decided to leave. Mostly because of the hard living conditions, the lack of food and water and malaria... At that time the government set up reception centres for the students that wanted to come back home; the government announced on the radio that it was OK to return home and that students would be welcomed back and that they had nothing to be afraid of. Those who returned were questioned by the army and had to sign a confession saying that they would not be engaged in political activities in the future. After signing you were on their list. I never considered going back. (Tim Maung Tum)

Soon after we reached the Thae Baw Poe Camp in KNU area, the Burmese and the Thai governments started a joint operation to bring the students home. They threw letters from airplanes and gave money (5000 baht) to the students who were willing to return. Around 5000 students, nearly half of the camp, decided to go back. Some contacted the Burmese embassy in Bangkok and they arranged for their return, some just went back using the same route, some sneaked in.... Even the student who came up with the name "ABSDF" left! Some of the students who left immediately after the coup were trying to return to Burma. But I had spent three months under the provisions; when they were trying to go back I was actually going in the opposite direction, I was trying to leave Burma. I never thought about returning home. (Aung Win Tin)







*B*efore the ABSDF was formed the students were scattered around the Thai, Indian and Chinese border areas. They had their own leaders. They named themselves differently. We realised we had to organise. We approached the KNU to help us to organise a meeting including delegations from the different camps. Once we had permission from the KNU moving along the border was not difficult. They allowed us to meet in the Wanka area. Around 30 delegates participated in the meeting. This is when the decision to form the ABSDF was made and the first Central Committee was elected. This was November 1st 1988. After this meeting there was another also along the Thai/Burma border where the military structure and organisation of the ABSDF was decided. (U Sue Htut)

Finally news arrived that there would be a students' conference at one of the KNU controlled areas. We sent a delegation, which included Htun Aung Kyaw, who many of my colleagues and I didn't imagine, became the first ABSDF chairman. We were positive and hopeful after its formation because at least we had a students' group. But still, the ABSDF was not a functioning organisation. Creating a common structure for all of us scattered along different locations took time, even if we had a common name. For a couple of months the ABSDF was not a living body. At the beginning we did not have a long-term plan, a long-term mind-set. We thought everything would be very quick. We would just get the arms and comeback. Even when my mother was packing my bag before leaving home, I remember telling her I would not be away for longer than six months; she was packing two sweaters and I told her one would be enough. We all had lack of knowledge, lack of experience, and lack of communication with those among ourselves who knew what the armed struggle would be like. (Kyaw Thura)

Most of the ethnic leaders understood the political situation, that's why they felt responsible to care for the younger students arriving in the area. They helped us organise a convention, which was attended by representatives from the different camps where we established the ABSDF, on November 1st 1988. When they announced on the radio that the ABSDF had been founded we felt very happy and cheered. Even though we did not get the chance to attend the meeting, we were so happy! (Ko Than Khe)

During the 1988 uprising, I was the vice-chair of one of the strike committees in my region. I was one of the leaders, but when I joined the ABSDF I felt that women were not integrated in the leadership structures, even if we were all students, we were all at the same level, it took us, women, a long time to prove that we were capable, that we could also be leaders. When the ABSDF was formed at a big conference near Manerplaw, all the camps sent their delegations. At that time, travelling through Thailand was very dangerous because we did not have documents, so, it was decided that the journey was too risky for the women and we were left behind. Was the journey not dangerous for men? That conference was the place where leaders were elected but, we women were not encouraged to participate. (Ma Sue Pwint)

In 1992 or 1993 Dr Nain Aung, the ABSDF chairman at the time went to New Delhi to participate in the South East Asia Students Conference and the students at the Burma/India border could meet with him. We agreed there that all the students who had left from Burma should be together as one organisation. After that, in 1994 the headquarters sent a delegation to our camps. In April that year we joined together as ABSDF. Unity was our first priority. We felt happy to unify. (Ko Thura)

From the different camps we, the students, shared the same vision, which was comprised of four objectives:

- 1) to liberate our people from oppression;
- 2) to bring democracy and human rights to Burma;
- 3) to achieve peace, and
- 4) to form a Federation in Burma.

This final objective was to form a Federation: even the word “Federation” was hard to say for the democracy organisations, particularly inside Burma; including the NDL as to date they have never said this word very clearly. But we are very proud of ourselves, because ABSDF in its first Declaration stated that a Federation is needed for Burma. We had this understanding since the beginning. (Ko Than Khe)

I do not think armed struggle is violence. Violence means chaos, no discipline, no rules. We had discipline. The armed struggle was a tool for peace. (Salai Yaw Aung)

The uniqueness of the ABSDF is the combination of students and other youth who decided to use another means if their demands were not met by pacific means. Students from different parts of the country left their homes and went to the border areas and decided to form the ABSDF. (Myo Win)

The Will

As the fire devours firewood,
We sacrifice our lives
To light the world.

My friend,
My colleague,
Who dug the sun
To unearth a new era and
Got a blood-soaked suit.

Yesterday,
He fixed and polished his Kalashnikov rifle
To be ready and to shine.

Yesterday,
When he was on sanctuary duty,
He watched solemnly towards
A dim-lit city situated far way and
Confounded with emotion.
was thinking of his family.
What they will say about him,
Gathered for a family dinner.

Smoke, dust and explosions,
In the midst of automatic fire-bursts,
The loud thrust of our cry calling to fire, fire, fire...
We must fire upon the reactionary enemy,
That is the call of revolutionary war.

My friend,
Be strong, please.
What do you want to say?
What do you want to tell?
What message do you want to leave?
The light went out
As the earth covers the sun.

He didn't ask
To hang his photograph
On the wall of "our belief".
He didn't ask
To salute his photograph
In cinema hall.
He didn't ask
To print his photograph
On colourful currency notes.
He didn't ask a word.

He slept silently.
In a small notebook,
He noted;
*"I couldn't eat anything
During my illness for 20 days.
I dreamed of my mother's sour soup
Last night."*

My hand is trembling
When I write a telegram
To report to the headquarters.

Yaw Han Aung
Vol. 3. No. 1. Jan-Feb, 1992.

*E*ven though I was older than many of the students I have to say that they were very smart. They could guide people like me. I was very military oriented and I wanted to fight, but the students encouraged us to read more. Sometimes I made fun of them: “did I leave the school and join the struggle to read? I want to fight!” But it is true, you can get a lot of knowledge from books. When we formed the Camp Committee I always encouraged the students to take the lead; I would tell them: “do not get involved in the fighting, this is for us, you guys are educated, you need to take the leading role”. (Khin Maung Win)

All the time in the frontline I felt I had a very big responsibility. But in my entire time only one student died and another was injured. (Wai Linn Zin)

I have spent most of my time at the frontline. Life there was very difficult. Sometimes we had the gun but no bullets. Our guns were very old. Sometimes we had no food, or we had no money, or we had food but could not cook it because the government troops were near and it was dangerous. We had many feelings. But we were very strong in our minds. If there was no food, we would not eat, or if we had to fight we would not sleep... no problem. I was wounded two times with a 49mm gun, one time in the leg, and one time in the arm. I was not taken to the hospital because it was too far. But I rested and recovered and returned to the frontline. (Mya Win)

The frontline was not at all what I had imagined. Living conditions were very poor. I thought we would have to fight for a short time, that once we got the arms everything was going to be very quick.... But then I realised I was probably going to die there. (Nay Myo Htike)

Weddings were very funny; they were not like in the city. They were “jungle weddings”. The ABSDF provided a bit of money for the couple. Sometimes we tried to set up group weddings. Afterwards we celebrated very simple parties, with whiskey, if possible, a pig or a chicken... very simple. They would say their

vows in front of the leaders. There was a music band formed by the ABSDF and they played all kinds of music (love songs, marching songs... all types of songs!) When a couple wanted to get married they had to apply for permission from the leadership. We had our own regulation: the grooms had to have at least 3 years of service, the brides 5 years. Otherwise the marriage was not accepted. (Ko Than Khe)

My wedding had been unplanned. One of our rules was that men had to serve a number of years before getting married. So we applied for permission to marry but we decided to marry before even getting their response. I entered into an argument with some people at the camp and said: "OK, I will marry tomorrow". There was no rice, no chicken at my wedding; only some biscuits, and coffee. Only ten people attended, but I was happy! (Ma Hnounge)

I have spent most of my time at the frontline. Having a family in these circumstances is too difficult. I have not got married. I have been very happy. Even if life was very difficult we were strong. (Mya Win)

I spent six months on the frontline. Afterwards I returned to the base camp and rested for a while. At the same time we would get more military training and later be sent to the frontline again. I have been doing this routine of frontline, rest, frontline, for over 20 years. This has been my responsibility. This is also what I am best at. (Khin Kyaw)

Finally we got military training from the KNPP. Afterwards I was sent to the frontline. After having spent five months at the KNPP headquarters I was happy to be somewhere else, get new experiences and have a chance to do what I wanted to do: fighting. I felt free. We took over one township and the Burmese army fled as they were outnumbered. That was my first military experience. Real fighting is totally different from the movies. Sometimes you have to walk the whole night; sometimes you only have bamboo shoots to eat, or only rice.

Your friends get killed. I don't know how to explain how hard it is. That was a time of learning. We put our lives in each other's hands. We went through all the hardships together. This way we trusted each other. (Tim Maung Tum)

We received military training from those among us who had previous military experience. I also received training on radio communication. In 1990 the KNU and the NMST provided guns and we went to the frontline. At that time the ABSDF and the NMST fought together. The relation between the two groups was good, we trusted each other because the senior officer in my Battalion (101) was from Mon State and could speak the Mon language. I spent six months at the frontline. The first time I engaged in battle I was scared and a little nervous. But afterwards I was very happy. I remember in 1990 we organised a big offensive to take one town over and to show the government that we did not support the elections. 45 of our soldiers were captured alive when they ran out of bullets. They were executed in public (beaten to death) by the Burmese army. (Thein Lwin)

When I gave birth I was over 30. My friends and my husband asked me to deliver at a Thai hospital because there could be difficulties while giving birth. I didn't listen to them and refused their suggestion because I didn't want to take advantage, or I did not want to think for myself alone because there were other pregnant women at the jungle as well and I did not want to take the privileges for my own well. Therefore, I decided to deliver my baby in the jungle. It was so unlucky and bad timing for me, I guess because the delivery process was not going well with me compared to other women. (Ma Sue Pwint)

When I got pregnant people told me I should go to a Chinese hospital to give birth, but I thought that was unfair to other pregnant women. Some leaders delivered their babies at the Chinese hospital, but I chose not and then all this bad things happened. I decided to give birth in the camp. But when the water broke I knew there was something wrong. So I was taken to the KIA

hospital for a C-Section. Normally there would be two or three doctors that could perform the operation but when I arrived there was only one female doctor, who was exhausted and not ready to do the operation. She tried to “push the baby out” and that meant that the baby suffered a lot. The baby was born alive but died afterwards. That was 1997. (Ma Hnounge)

At the beginning the ABSDF fought together with the KNU; at that time the command came from the KNU officer because it was a learning moment for the ABSDF. But later on the ABSDF could fight on it's own. That gave us more freedom, but also more responsibility. Before we just had to follow, now we had to take our own decisions. During that time the ABSDF undertook a number of big military operations under the name of Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB). I was a Column Commander of DAB Column No. 12. We launched a number of offensives and attacked some towns inside Burma and Burmese army headquarters. Once one of my men, who was a medical doctor, lost his glasses in the middle of the battle. He couldn't see anything and got lost. The villagers found him and hid him in a safe place and helped him to go to Rangoon to get a pair of new glasses. His father was a very senior officer at a government department. He found out that his son was in Rangoon and informed the authorities who went and questioned him. During the interrogation they gave him a cup water to drink. The next morning he was dead. Nobody knows what happened to him. (Saw Maun Oo)



We fought mostly in mountainous areas. It was hard to get water and to cook food. We had to walk 30 minutes to go to the place where we could cook and then another 30 minutes to bring the food back. It was not easy to make a fire during the rainy season. Sometimes we did not even have time to sleep. There were no women in the ABSDF column, but there were in the KNU's. ABSDF female members stayed at the district group office. (Thant Zin)

The role of women within the ABSDF depended highly on the camps. Camps in the Southern part had a high presence of women, and therefore they took the military training and fought at the frontline just like their male comrades. In my camp we were only 10 women out of 600 people. Only three of us were university students and the other seven were very young high school students. They were struggling against malaria and other things all the time. The camp chiefs told them that they could join the military training if they so wished, but it was up to them. As for me, I took the military training and learnt how to march and shoot guns. but there were other trainings I was not allowed to take. I only went to the frontline twice, but not to fight; one was to cheer my comrades after a very hard clash, and another one was to bring ammunition for the confrontation. (Ma Sue Pwint)

The Manerplaw offensive was the strongest military offensive in Burmese history. Many ABSDF members sacrificed their lives in this operation. Many people lost their lives. Manerplaw was the centre of the resistance movement; it was the most threatening place for the Burmese army, that's why they put in a lot of energy and effort to crush it. The Manerplaw offensive started in December 1991 and lasted for the whole of 1992. There was a pause in 1993 and started again in 1994 until 1995. It lasted for six years. There were more than 200 direct attacks. The Manerplaw offensive was very inclusive. Different ethnic armed groups and the ABSDF fought together. We had over 3000 joint forces. Manerplaw is very mountainous, geographically is a very complex area. Those living in the villages around had to flee to Thailand. After the Manerplaw battle, the Burmese army started launching offensives on other ABSDF base-camps and we lost many of them. Before the Manerplaw fall in 1995 the main military strategy was conventional warfare. We had manpower, ammunition, base camps... and it was easy to implement the conventional war. But after the

fall of Manerplaw, we had to change the military strategy to adapt to the new situation: we had smaller units and moved around more. After the Manerplaw fall the KNU and the ABSDF tried to recapture their lost camps. After three years we recovered around half of them. On the China and India borders they used other strategies. For the armed resistance groups the Manerplaw offensive had both advantages and disadvantages. One impact on the ABSDF was that we decreased our manpower. It was a very hard time; there were many casualties. After the fall everything was very chaotic. Many people could not continue following the journey of the armed struggle and left. But at the same time, we gained trust from the Alliance Groups and got more support from the local communities; they saw our commitment and capacity. We also gained a lot of military and political experience. By fighting alongside them we also learnt to understand the ethnic armed resistance groups. And this knowledge has stayed with us, and I think it can contribute enormously to national reconciliation in Burma. That's the most valuable thing we have learnt over the last 20 years. Many ethnic groups also recognise these values in the ABSDF. (Khin Kyaw)

My Column was also involved in the Manerplaw offensive. In the course of the offensive one of my men died. He was killed in action. 35 of them were wounded. Some lost their arms or legs, even eyes. When someone was killed in the frontline, which was always far from the base camp, we performed a small ceremony: someone read out the last orders; we would say: "you are no longer part of the ABSDF, you can go anywhere you want". It is a very sad moment, a very emotional moment. But if we were near the base camp we would carry the body and bury it there. There is an ABSDF cemetery in Manerplaw. (Saw Maun Oo)

I lived on the frontline for one and a half years. I spent all that time living inside the trenches. Conditions were sometimes good, sometimes bad. It was very cold inside. At the beginning I had to sleep in the mud. My skin turned yellow and itchy. I got sick. After that we collected wood and made beds. Often we could not leave for many days. Or we would leave the trench and come back again as soon as the shelling started. In each trench we were in small groups of around two people. We communicated with a walkie-talkie. Sometimes I felt scared. It was very easy to die. But we focused on our objectives; we did not

have a choice. I do not have happy memories of that time. One time we were shelled for one day. You would hear the sound of the shots around you. You could not see anything outside. Just fire. We were afraid. We felt lonely. After that battle I had a very sad feeling. We won that battle. I am not sure, but I think we made more than 10 war prisoners, and collected lots of weapons. In the morning KNU and ABSDF troops went to see the arms we had accumulated from the enemy. I had eaten breakfast and went to sleep and rest. Suddenly I heard a series of very big explosions. The weapons we had collected from the enemy had exploded. I am not sure how many people died. I think 35 people died on the spot. I was really sorry. I did not want to go and see the area. The people told me: "don't go; it is really bad, there is blood everywhere. You could not find your friends. Nothing was left." (Salai Yaw Aung)

My first battle was very frightening. I was nervous, but later on I was able to overcome these feelings. By that time I was over 32. I knew our fight was against the system, not against the people. Sometimes I had an internal conflict. I knew the Burmese soldiers were part of the system, I did not want to kill them because it was not their fault; it was the system's fault. But I had to shoot them. Otherwise they would shoot at me. (Ko Min Min)

I remember one day when 17 ABSDF members lost their lives during one battle. I remember hoping that one day the war would be over in Burma. Because we were fighting against each other, Burmese against Burmese. In a war if you win, you lose; if you lose, you lose. (Khin Kyaw)





Golden statute

Comrade,
You departed us
on a mid-day of a summer.

Sorry, we have little time
to mourn for your funeral.

And we have no gold
to sculpt your statute
in polite and deserved honour.

Nevertheless,
We have raised your rough
Blood-soaked shirt,
As our flag, and march ahead,
By that, we hope
You can be assured to rest in peace.

- Htay Aung



*B*eing at the frontline made us realise of all the things that we had when we were living in the cities but did not have anymore. We watched the government-sponsored movies where the KNU insurgents were always portrayed as the very bad guys. We were born with this image of them. We always had a very unclear understanding of the ethnic people. But when we came to the ethnic areas we saw that the KNU was not like that, and that the Karen people were just trying to survive the situation. By being with them we could learn about their culture. We had never been to Karen State; forget Shan State, which is very far. We saw that they were scared of the Burmans. Even children were. They had carried this fear from generation to generation. (Ko Kyaw Ko)



After the military training I was sent to the frontline with one column, but my role was to organise medical services for the people rather than fighting. At that time there were many medical students in my camp so we carried a lot of medical stuff with us. That was the first time I could see the ethnic people. I did not know anything about them before. Whenever we arrived to a village in the ethnic area we tried to transmit the feeling of being part of their family. We tried to help them at least by carrying the water for them, or preparing firewood for them. Our mind set was that we had taken the arm struggle not just to topple the government, but also to help the people. Thus, we felt that we had to work for the people, that what we were doing was for them. We could stay at their houses and they treated us very warmly. Ethnic villagers hated the Burmese army. They called them "Burmese soldier" in their language, but to us, ABSDF members, they called us "student soldiers". We had a different identity. In my experience if you treat the ethnic people warmly, you receive warmth in return. (Min Zaw)

The KNU soldiers did not speak Burmese and we did not speak Karen. It was hard to communicate. Some of them told me: “Burma is not Karen”. Sometimes I worried about that situation. We had to go step by step. It took them some time to trust us. At that time I did not understand why they did not trust us. But now I understand. And I agree. One KNU senior leader told me: “ABSDF and KNU have no problem. We should fight together”. (Mya Win)

Before 1988 I did not know what happened in the ethnic areas. At that time we had only one radio channel run by the government, one newspaper, run by the government. Information was propaganda. We only heard bad things about the ethnic revolutionary groups. How they had killed somebody and so on. If you hear propaganda every day you believe it. When I got to the jungle I saw something completely different. The KNU welcomed us, they provided us with security until we reached a safe area. I learnt about how the government violates the ethnic people. I met families whose women had been raped and shot by the Burmese army in front of the men. You could see that they were very angry with the Burmese. Army meant Burmese, Burmese meant Army. They really hated it when people spoke in the Burmese language. They hated the Burmans. They had this feeling when we arrived in 1988. But they saw that the ABSDF was also fighting against the government. This made us connect. When we arrived to the KNU area we understood their feelings. We accepted their feelings. And they understood us. We sacrificed for Burma. I live in a Karen area. Some Karen soldiers have tattooed “I will kill Burman”. I am a Burman. How do I feel? It is very hard. We (them and us) have all sacrificed a lot. 24 years I would say. But over these years we have built trust, although not 100% trust, maybe only 25%, that’s all. I think some people trust us more than 25% but they do not express it. When we arrived to the jungle the Karen people called us “Kyaw Phoe”, which means “Students” in the Karen language. “Pa Yaw” was how Karen called the Burmese Army, as well as the Burmese people. When the army came they would say “Pa Yaw, Helly!” So, we said to them “we are Pa Yaw too”. And one old lady told us: “no my sons, you are not Pa Yaw. You are Kyaw Phoe”; they accepted us; we changed their mind in a very short time. At that time I was at our HQ in Manerplaw and when the ABSDF troops came they explained us what the old lady had told them. My experience in the KNU area is similar to the experience of other ABSDF members who are living in other ethnic minorities areas, such as the MON,

KNPP, Shan and Kachin areas. They hate the Burmans. We need to talk to them, explain to them. Getting rid of this anger, of these feelings is very hard. I still see it sometimes. Even if we have been fighting together for 24 years. And I understand it. It is hard to change your mind. It is the consequence of the war, the outcome of the war. We have made an effort to build mutual friendship. “You recognise me, I recognise you”, that was the first step of national reconciliation. Then, “you trust me a little bit, I trust you a little bit”. We developed a common care for each other. That’s why the ABSDF carries so many responsibilities on our shoulders: we have a double role to play for national reconciliation: at the Burman side (national reconciliation among the Burman), and at the ethnic side (national reconciliation between the Burman and the ethnic nationalities). We are in between both. National reconciliation is a long process that lasts until you die. (Salai Yaw Aung)

When the ABSDF was formed we had no guns, so we asked the KNU and other groups to help us with arms and ammunition and they started giving them to us after we gained their trust. The Karen hated Burmese people. In order to overcome that hate we went to the frontline with them, we fought alongside them. During the first battle we killed six members of the army and they retreated. The KNU thought that we would not kill other Burmans but they saw us fighting. They saw we were committed to the cause. This is how they started trusting us. Sometimes we fought together with the KNU. Sometimes we told them: “you stay behind, we go first”, so that they could see we were committed. We wanted to clear their suspicion so that we could get more ammunition and more food from them. (Maung Maung Taik)

I learnt a lot from the KNU, especially in terms of military strategies. When the NLD won the elections in 1990 we thought we would be able to come home. We were very happy, but the villagers at the frontline seemed sad because they thought the students were leaving; they asked: “what about us?” and we said: “don’t worry, Aung San Suu Kyi has won the elections, she will solve everything”. (Khin Maung Win)

If I look back I always remember how we helped the villagers along the way, the schools we helped build. The teachers in these villages came from Upper Burma, their salaries were too low for them to survive. We did not have any

money but we tried to get donations from business people and give it to the teachers. You could hardly say that the school buildings were buildings. So we would help improving them, or we were involved in road construction, I even helped with delivering babies. We supported each other. The villagers would reserve rice, or food for the ABSDF. We told the villagers “the government is Burman, we are also Burmans, but we are different Burmans, so call them “enemy”, not Burmans””. These are happy memories. (Moe Kyaw Oo)

I believe the most significant contribution from the ABSDF was helping people inside Burma be more aware of what the ethnic people were fighting for, the reasons behind their struggle. The three means of the ABSDF struggle, the diplomatic, military and political means are still intact. (Ko Lwan Ni)

The local villagers protected us. If it would not have been for them we would be dead by now. They were scared of the Burmese army because when they came to their villages they raped the woman, arrested the men, interrogated and killed them in public; all these abuses were committed. But when the students came they were very nice, very kind to them. We helped; shared our knowledge... that's why they liked us. When we talk about the people on the frontline, there are two kinds of people: the ones who are hiding all the time in the jungle, and those in the villages under the government control. You have to deal with both groups. You have to be very careful when you go to villages under the government control. The villagers provided the food for us; we had to be very wise and cautious. You could not use the violent means. You had to make them understand what you were doing and why. Villagers in conflict areas are not allowed to have small batteries, for example. If the army finds out they are punished. But for us batteries were vital because we needed them for our radio communication, so the only way we could get them is from the cities inside the country. So villagers risked their lives when they went to the cities to get batteries for us. In this way you can see how much they supported us. (Saw Maung Oo)

We have our four objectives. They are for Burma. Without them Burma cannot survive. The most important one, for me, is Federalism, because in Burma we have many ethnic nationalities and they have no rights. When I

came to the jungle I knew a little bit about human rights. Sometimes foreigners would come, but they did not know about human rights. That was because they had rights since they were born, if they wanted to demonstrate, they could, if they wanted to criticise their government, they could. But in Burma we did not have any freedom. We did not have human rights. That's why they are so important for us. And for the ethnic people. (Salai Yaw Aung)

It is important to remember that the ABSDF was born out of the 1988 uprising. It is the only student army. This is its uniqueness. Students turned into soldiers. The understanding that the ABSDF gained from the ethnic groups, and trust we built with them is another of our strengths. Despite the challenges, the ABSDF was able, to some extent, to adapt to the post cold war scenario by engaging in mass movements, working with the community members, providing capacity building etc. We even published a book about Federalism; we have been at the forefront of advocating for Federalism in Burma. Before the ABSDF nobody recognised the ethnic groups' struggle; they were just seen as "insurgents", as "rebels". But we built bridges with them. We organised so that they could meet with other leaders so that they could understand about them. Even the NLD had never spoken about Federalism until 2010. But now everybody is starting to refer to it; even the government. This is the impact of what the ABSDF has been doing for the last 25 years. (Ko Min Min)

ABSDF has a collective leadership. We make decisions collectively. We elect our leaders on the basis of consensus. For any position, military or political, you need the approval from the ABSDF members. One of the criteria for election is how much the person can contribute to the job. (Khin Kyaw)

Every two or three years we at the ABSDF hold a Conference. Every regiment has to vote for its representatives. The ballot casting is secret. Those elected represent their Regiment at the ABSDF Conference. The Conference elects the Central Committee members. (Myint Oo)

Over the last years the ABSDF has got smaller, many people have left the organisation for various reasons, most of which, I believe, are personal reasons. Because after a period of time people started to get married and have their own families, and started to think about their future, specially at times when the organisation was in a stagnant situation, when the political situation inside Burma was not moving, or when our movements were restricted because of the ceasefire agreements between the government and the allies forces, or for other reasons that were beyond our control. And I personally do not blame them for thinking of themselves. It is very natural. (Kyaw Thura)

Life on the frontline has changed over the last 25 years. There is less manpower, and this is due to several reasons: when the KNU split and lost its headquarters in Manerplaw in 1995 the ABSDF also lost its base camp. We had to fight to get new territory. It was a very difficult time. Many ABSDF members were disappointed; they did not want to stay on the frontline any longer and many left. At the same time UNHCR “options” became available to everyone, and I personally believe that this also had an impact as many students decided to apply for refugee status. The ABSDF also had it’s own difficulties in providing enough food, ammunition to the members on the frontline. Living conditions became very poor and this discouraged many of our members. These changes have taken place over the last 20 years and explain the decrease in ABSDF manpower. But in spite of all of this the ABSDF has remained part of the struggle, and we have firmly maintained our positions until now. (Min Khant)

In 1991, one year after I joined, the ABSDF split into two groups. As a result three groups were formed in my camp: one followed Mae Thee Zun, the other Dr. Naig Aung and another group was neutral. The split affected us differently. Some camps divided internally into two groups following the different factions, some camps entirely joined one faction whilst others remained neutral. This was a friendly division. We did not fight against each other; we stayed separated. In 1996 the ABSDF unified. (Ko Lwan Ni)

There have also been many bad moments. The worst was when the ABSDF split. We were at the frontline when we heard the news. We did not know



where to go, which leadership to go to. That was the worst moment for the ABSDF (Moe Kyaw Oo)

During the 3rd ABSDF Conference in 1991, the ABSDF split into two groups, even though we had the same goals and believed in the same struggle. That was what had the worst impact on the ABSDF. It also had a negative impact on the struggle and a negative impact on the country. Because of this division we lost many members, as they lost faith in the leadership on both sides. The split also provoked a management problem. It was harder to organise

and the readiness to obey orders decayed. We also lost faith and trust from the ethnic groups. One of the reasons for the split was the idea of how to carry the armed struggle on. We also had an ideological conflict about whether or not the armed struggle was the way to go. The ABSDF had been founded on the ideology of armed struggle as the main mean for achieving our goals. But at that time we did not realise that the cold war was already over; we did not consider how that would affect us. The international organisations stopped supporting the armed struggles, but our belief, our commitment was that armed struggle was our way to go, so the pressure we received from the international community was for us to change; we did not fit into their positions. We were doing what we believed in, but the international trends went in another direction. We moved in different ways. Some ABSDF members thought that the armed struggle would not work and decided to go to other countries and continue with their studies. Many options opened up for them. They could go to Bangkok and apply for refugee status. In the meantime the ABSDF was facing many difficulties; even surviving was hard. We only got humanitarian support, for education and health care programmes, but not for our armed activities. In order to have our own territory we had to go beyond the territories of the ethnic armed groups, but we were not able to do it because of the hardships we faced in the organisation. The main challenge was that we could not adapt to the new situation: the cold war was over, the international community had other priorities, but we had to stand by ourselves. (Ko Min Min)

The saddest moment was when I had to leave my husband in the Kachin area and move to the Thai/Burma border. We were moved to two different places: the family members (around 50 between wives – mostly ABSDF members although some of them from nearby communities, and children) were moved to a safer place, and the camp workers (men) were moved closer to the frontline. My husband and I were separated. I did not see him for two years. That was the most traumatic moment for me. (Ma Hnong)

I have been discouraged or tired sometimes. We don't have liberated areas, even if we are an independent organisation we rely on other armed groups, KNU, KNPP etc. Sometimes we cannot make the decisions we would like to make. This has also impacted on our lack of resources because we do not control any land, and therefore we do not have any income. Before 2001 we got some

money from NGOs, but afterwards most of them cut their funding. By 2007 the funds had gone. The ABSDF did not have regular income, no business. But the ethnic minority organisations had their own business, land, and livelihood... Without money life is very difficult. But we had gained the trust of the ethnic minority groups. They knew how we sacrificed. When we arrived they hated the Burmese, but now they understand because we have been fighting with them for over two decades. They have changed their minds. Now they believe us. (Mynt Oo)

In 1994, the KNP reached a ceasefire agreement with the government, which impacted the ABSDF. At that time my troops and I were deep inside Burma, we could not return back to the border. All we could do was remove the ABSDF sign from our uniforms and disguise ourselves as KNP members. Sometimes we would also disguise as KNU members as we moved between the areas of the two groups. (Min Zaw)

In 1990, the UNHCR made their programmes available for Burmese students. They could apply for refugee status, to continue their studies abroad or to settle in other countries. Many ABSDF women decided to apply and took that option. At that time it was easy to go to Bangkok and apply for refugee status, which would give you free education and access to health as well as an ID card, you had protection from UNHCR, you could even rent a house in Bangkok, or move to another country. These programmes were open not just to ABSDF but they were also available to ABSDF members. The impact of these policies was huge. I decided to stay. I felt responsible. How could I leave if my comrades, some of whom had fewer responsibilities than me, decided to stay? At the same time the camps were being run over by the Burmese army and we had to move our locations constantly. Many people got discouraged. That instability also had a very negative impact on the ABSDF. (Thein Mwin)

Over the last 25 years the most significant change that the ABSDF has experienced has been the decrease of its members. There have not been changes in terms of policy, or mission. But the decrease in the number of members including the number of resourceful, skilled members has been the main change. This is not because they did not like fighting; it is because people have formed families along the way and they have to take care of them. (Moe Kyaw Oo)





One day I received a letter from Ko Moe Thee Zun, the ABSDF chairperson, in which he asked three of us to visit him. We went somewhere near Mae Sot, where the ABSDF had an office. We stayed there for two nights and then we were sent to Manerplaw. We were told that some members of the PSLF (Palaung State Liberation Front) had come to Manerplaw and asked for ammunition because they could not buy it in their own area. They had also told Ko Moe Thee Zun that it would be great if there could be a students' camp in their territory, so Ko Moe Thee Zun had assigned a group of 30 of us to go with them and establish the camp. It seemed like a great opportunity and I was very keen to be part of it. At that time the ABSDF had lots of camps along the border: in Mon State, Karenni State and Shan State, but not in the Palaung territory. So we travelled towards the border triangle area: from Manerplaw to Mae Sariang and beyond Chiang Mai. It was a very hard trip and we had to cross a war zone. As we walked we realised that what they actually needed were people to carry the bullets they had bought on their way back! Each of us had to carry almost 700 bullets on the back. We could not even stand up by ourselves. We had to walk through open fields with no trees, cross mountains... we were given very slippery running shoes, which were useless... we realised they were not really interested in setting up an ABSDF camp, that was not the main reason for our presence, and when we confronted them they admitted it. When we arrived we established Camp 51. After six months the PSLF told us we should leave the area. 15 of us left and returned back to Manerplaw, but the rest decided to stay and when a few months later the PSLF signed a ceasefire with the government, the remaining ABSDF members joined ABSDF-North. I was lucky because almost all of them got arrested in the incidents that took place in 1991-1992 in ABSDF-North. I am sure that I would have got arrested as well because my father had been in the army. (Aung Win Tin)

When the incidents in the ABSDF-Northern Region took place in 1991-2 I was a company commander so I had heard about it. On the basis of my own analysis the killing of an individual, or of a group, is not acceptable not just for the ABSDF, but for everyone in Burmese society. Killing is not accepted. If you look at Burma, the country has been at war since 1948; since then violence has not been exclusive to the ethnic controlled areas, but it has taken place in the whole country: political violence, oppression happens in every city of

Burma. Everybody has faced violence in the country. But I think the ABSDF is accountable for the incidents in the Northern Region. This is part of the ABSDF history, and we want to deal with it, in a way where we can have a more open, and more accountable scenario. (Khin Kyaw)

Some journalists asked about the incidents of 1991-1992 in ABSDF-Northern. Before I did not know the details but later I understood more. This is something that should not have happened; this is something we have to deal with and which we should not forget. We should learn a lesson from it. After that incident the ABSDF developed more rules regarding mandates and authority. (Win Tin Han)



*B*ecause we have been fighting in different areas the ABSDF has entered into alliances over the years. We have never had a unified military style because ABSDF members received military training from different groups, from KNU to ex members of the Burmese army. This could even be seen in the way troops saluted the ABSDF flag. Everyone did it differently! The ABSDF has four very clear political objectives. But the way you implement your policies depends also on the territory you are in and the alliances you have entered into. Sometimes you are constrained by the circumstances. It was not always easy. Whilst advocating for our political objectives we had to listen to what our allies said. We had to harmonise our objectives with theirs. That was another limitation. The ABSDF had to create a good image. We actively got involved in the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB) through different military alliances. We initiated the discussions about Federalism, which gave way for the Manerplaw Agreement in which the ethnic groups expressed their support for federalism in Burma. ABSDF was also one of the founders of the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), which is the broadest coalition alliance. (Ko Kyaw Ko)

In 2003 I became a member of the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB), which was the biggest alliance at that time. I was part of their media research team. In 2004 I was also assigned to work as office in charge for the Democratic Alliance of Burma (DAB). In May 2004 I became a trainer for the Political Defiance Committee (PDC), which is a NCUB branch. The PDC looks at ways to confront the authorities using non-violent ways. My training was about non-violent and low risk resistance strategies. We also looked at how to mobilise people, how to advocate and raise people's awareness in relation to their human rights. I also taught leadership skills, organisational skills etc. People come from inside Burma to be trained. Before 2007 I taught mostly to old people, but afterwards it was mostly young people. All kinds of people have come to receive the training: students, a singer, one of the leading monks of the 2007 revolution was my trainee; I gave him four different trainings. I have been in this position until this year. You might wonder how someone who believes in the armed struggle became a trainer on the use of non-violent strategies. The Fifth Conference of the ABSDF lay down that the armed struggle should be combined with non-violence. This is how I became

involved in this sort of training. At that time there were exchanges with South Africa, Poland, Ukraine and people from other countries who came to share their experiences using mass movements to topple their governments. There was also one book called “From Dictatorship to Democracy” written by Gen Sharp, which also looks at non-violent means. (Ko Min Min)



I moved to the Headquarters in Manerplaw under Mae Thee Zun leadership where I was assigned to take charge of the information department and sent to Bangkok to set up the Dawn Oway Magazine. Dawn Oway was the “PR tool” of ABSDF. It informed people about what the ABSDF was doing, the course of the armed struggle etc., but it was not only propaganda. It was also mixed with art, with literature. It has been a very influential magazine. People looked forward to the next issue. (Ko Lwan Ni)



At the ABSDF Eight Conference (2007 until 2010) I was elected a member of the ABSDF Central Committee. I served as editor of the Dawn Oway Magazine. During my term we published eight volumes of the magazine. This is a very important publication for the ABSDF. It is a tool to outreach the people and to bring them the ABSDF struggle. Everyone from the ABSDF and its Alliance organisation could contribute to Dewey Magazine and the editor would be the one in charge of selecting the articles in accordance with the ABSDF political objectives. The publication is not just a tool for propaganda. It reflects the real life of the ABSDF. Unfortunately, due to lack of funding we have now stopped publishing it. Before we would publish it every three months. The first issue of Dawn Oway was published in 1988, when the ABSDF was formed, and the latest one on the 1st of November 2012 to mark the ABSDF anniversary. Dawn Oway was distributed to the ABSDF camps, to the alliance organisations, to the ABSDF supporters around the world, to Burmese migrant workers in Thailand and we also sent the publication secretly inside Burma, which is extremely dangerous. Many people have been sent to prison for this. I used to publish my poems in the Dawn Oway Magazine. Dawn Oway means “the voice

of the peacock”. The peacock is the historic symbol of the Burmese students, so Dawn Oway means “the voice of the students”. (Ko Pouk)

When I worked for the ABSDF Information Department as part of the Central Committee I would focus on administrative-related activities. At that time I did not think too much about women’s situation. But then I started realising that women would mostly work cooking, or as part of non-political committees such as the finance committee, or that once married they would be encouraged to move to the family camps rather than to the HQs. But women had joined the ABSDF to fight, to participate in the political struggle, not to cook; I saw a lot of potential on women, I felt that women’s capabilities were not being recognised, nor promoted. Working in the political arena is not easy for women. I also felt that women approached conflict very differently than men but we could not truly participate. (Ma Sue Pwint)

In 1994, the KNU split into two groups, one Christian and one Buddhist. One year later the KNU Headquarter in Manerplaw was taken over by one of the splinter groups, the DKBA (Democratic Karen Buddhist Army) together with the Burmese army. This had an impact on the ABSDF. The resistance movement had to slow down. The ABSDF Central Committee decided it was a good moment to strengthen the political pressure, and therefore, proposed that the women within the ABSDF should move towards political activities. We realized that it was really important to recognize politically the role of women and a decision was taken to form a women’s rights group. I was assigned to form what later became the Burmese Women’s Union (BWU) with the support from ABSDF’s Central Committee. I was also one of the founders of the Women’s League of Burma (WLB). Since that time I fully dedicated to the women as member of the ABSDF. We, women, had lengthy debates about whether our women’s organisation should be under the ABSDF umbrella or independent of the ABSDF. We finally decided that the organisation should be independent from the ABSDF and should implement its own political activities. However, some ABSDF members felt that it should be under ABSDF administration. But we felt that we, as women, did not have enough working space within the ABSDF. There was no discrimination, but there was no working space.

We contacted ABSDF women who were living abroad and formed branches in different countries such as Austria, the USA and Norway. We also started communicating with women in the ABSDF Northern and Western branches. In 1995, we participated in the UN 4th Conference on Women in Beijing and presented our pledge. Until 1997 we worked without a formal structure. Some years later some of the most experienced women left the ABSDF and we had to recruit more members and focus on capacity building. I had been serving as Chairperson of the BWU for over 10 years, and now I am still working as member of the Executive Committee of the BWU. (Ma Sue Pwint)

I attended the 1st BWU Conference in Thailand where I understood how significant was to have an independent organisation. I also realised how different the Southern (Thai/Burma) ABSDF branch was from the Northern one. In ours the military structure was very strong. That is my happiest memory, when we formed the Burmese Women Union in Thailand. At that time I was still in the Northern Region and we run our own grocery shop as part of the BWU activities. The men tried to interfere but we always stopped them! This was ours! One of the reasons why we decided to form the BWU as a separate organisation of the ABSDF was because as part of the ABSDF we would have had to follow the ABSDF leadership, which was composed by men, we would be “following their orders”, but we wanted to promote a larger role for women, so we thought that could be more effective by forming an independent political movement. There was a lot of internal debate among us. The BWU accepted the four political objectives of the ABSDF. However, when I was member of the ABSDF Central Committee I used to say: “the ABSDF has five political objectives, because we still need to fight for gender equality. This is political objective No. 5”. But many people thought that the women struggle was secondary, was the stage 2. I always thought that women rights should come along, should be part of the struggle. It should not be something to fight for afterwards. Many people felt that the women’s rights movement was not a political movement. They thought that it was “just about women’s rights”. But in fact, by fighting for their rights, women are also fighting for the dignity of Burma. (Ma Hnounge)

In August 1998 I became a backpack health worker. This was an initiative by the border health groups and the Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sot. It was another way of taking care of the ethnic people and the IDPs. Before we used what we called “mobile clinics”, but in 1997 the SPDC started a strong military offensive and many people left to the border with Thailand. The mobile clinic model was no longer useful, so we tried to create another type of assistance to reach them. At the beginning we did not have enough means. We could not cover all the areas, but afterwards we could cover the different ethnic areas, Mon, Karen, Pa O, Kachin etc. We provided medical services, public health education, mother and childcare. We ABSDF members groups worked at the frontline at the Karen area. We would spend six months at the frontline and then comeback to Mae Sot to stock more materials, have meetings etc. and leave again. We had good relations with the villagers because the areas where I worked were KNU controlled areas. After 18 years in the jungle I moved to Mae Sot seven years ago. I still work at the Back Pack Health Workers Team’s (BPHWT) office. It is a very different life style. (Chit Winn)

Nowadays we focus mostly on outreach activities and engagement with the people inside Burma. People understand the role that the ABSDF is playing and they support us. Older people are already familiar with the ABSDF. They know that the ABSDF is a student’s army formed by those who left after 1988 and that we are fighting against the government. But others have never heard of us before. Some of them where not born in 1988 so we need to start from the beginning, how was the ABSDF formed, what happened in 1988... some of them have not even heard about Aung San Suu Kyi! When I see that they understand the ABSDF it makes me happy. (Thant Zin)

If the 1988 uprising had not happened, if I would have not been part of the ABSDF, I would not be human because under the government at that time we did not have a chance to think humanly, we did not have a chance to live humanly. I became a real human by joining the resistance movement. (Ko Kyaw Ko)

Something very important that I have learnt with the ABSDF is how to live in a collective way, how to take decisions collectively. When I arrived in the jungle the first thing I had to learn was how to live in a collective way, how to run an organisation. This is very important. Burma still needs to learn to live not on an individual basis but as a collective. The society has never been allowed to take decisions collectively. (Myo Win)

Being a member of the ABSDF has of course impacted in my writing, especially in my poetry. I never thought I would see the real life of the ethnic people, I never imagined that I would put myself through war, even if I never wanted to. All this has transpired my poetry, which mostly touches upon these issues. During the past 20 years I have composed one poem for every anniversary of the ABSDF, to mark the date, to honour it. (Ko Lwan Ni)

ABSDF has been a lifetime experience. With the ABSDF I have learnt about commitment and perseverance. I have learnt not to give up easily. I have learnt to survive to many difficult situations. I have learnt how to work with other people. I have also learnt many skills; we have had many opportunities to train ourselves. I think we still have a lot to contribute to Burma. Peace is a step-by-step process. Everybody should join. Maybe in the future we will change our lifestyle again. (Chit Winn)

Why did I join the ABSDF in 2005? I always believed that the armed struggle was the best way to achieve democracy in Burma. I still believe this today. I also believed that the ABSDF was the organisation representing the students. In Burma all the students interested in politics knew about the ABSDF. It is the only student army in the world. I thought my qualifications and abilities could be used to build democracy in Burma. This is the reason why I joined the ABSDF. (Thant Chein Myint)

My hometown is very near the border, I would just need one-day trip to go there, but I have not been able to return. Three years ago, now I can tell you, my father came to visit me. Three years ago the situation was more complicated and I could not accompany him to the bus station to take the bus back into Burma because this is an area where you can always find military intelligence officers, so it was not safe for him. We said goodbye at the market. He did not say anything. He just touched my shoulder and left. Just by this gesture I knew he was telling me “keep fighting”. It was so meaningful. I felt very encouraged. (Saw Silas)

In the course of 25 years we have lost so many things. But we have also had successes: we have built trust with the ethnic armed groups. But we haven't achieved democracy yet, so we cannot say we have reached our objectives. (Saw Maung Oo)

Before the ABSDF only focused on fighting, but later on we tried to concentrate on the political activities. The military and the political aspects came together. This has been a change that I have seen over the last 25 years. This is positive. This is my personal opinion. ABSDF is my mother organisation. I want her to bright as much as possible in the future. In 2006 I met my elder brother again. The family of one of the ABSDF member came to visit him in Mae Sot and I could send a letter with them. It was a brief meeting. It lasted less than a day. He told me: “you are doing a very important job; you are helping the people in Burma. Don't make mistakes, don't comeback until you finish”. (Kyaw Kyaw)

Even if I thought the struggle would be over in three or four years, you cannot control history. You have to go with the history. We have been fighting for almost 25 years. Maybe it will take longer; maybe it will be over soon.





Even if we want it to be over soon, history is bigger than you. You cannot control it. I am a member of the ABSDF. My past, my present, my future are the ABSDF past, present and future. I want the ABSDF as an organisation to bring democracy inside Burma based on our four political objectives. My hopes for the future are ABSDF's hopes. (Ko Pouk)





*I*n November 1997 I was assigned to go inside Burma to set up a base and collect information. I was sent to work on a farm, located in a small village in the area of Naipidaw before the city was built. I worked raising chickens as a cover. My contacts in Rangoon leaked the information and the intelligence came and arrested me. I had been there for only two months, and I was taken to a detention camp.

They tied me up and gave me no food for one full day and one night. They questioned, but did not torture me. I was sent to the criminal prison and the next day was taken to Rangoon to Ya Kgi Aine, an infamous interrogation centre. I was asked to sit straight in a chair that had no back and that was too tall, so my feet could not touch the ground. I was chained. I was not given food., and beaten from time to time. It was not very serious torture. Around forty or fifty people had been arrested before me.

Later I was sent to Insein prison in Rangoon. I was put in solitary confinement, in a little cell. I shared it with a MP. I stayed there for one month. I was not allowed to leave the cell, and was given very little food. The interrogation continued.

They asked me many questions: When did you arrive? Who are your contacts? But the truth is that I did not know anybody. When I had arrived inside Burma I had been totally occupied with the animals on the farm and had not had any chance to make contact with anyone! But the military intelligence thought I knew everything so they kept pressing me as they where trying to build the case against me. After one month I was sent to a Special Court hearing that took place inside the prison. I was charged with National Treason and possessing explosive devices. The government provided me with a legal counsellor but just for show. He did not speak at all during the trial. Even when the judge said something that would favour me the military intelligence told him “no, you can’t do that”.

I knew the sentence would be harsh but I did not expect it to be so heavy. I was sentenced to death and to 14 years of imprisonment. On death row I felt sad and sorry for my wife and little son, who were in one of the refugee camps

near Mae Sot. I believed the death sentence would be carried out, but I tried to be strong.

In 2005 I was allowed to send my family the first letter after an ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) visit. Conditions were very strict. We were not allowed to talk to each other; we wore hoods on our way to the showers. We could then shower for two minutes. We could leave our cells only for 15 minutes a day to walk (this time increased over the years, so after three years in prison I could leave the cell for one hour a day). We were kept in individual cells. After five months I could not walk. My legs hurt and I was in pain. Everything felt broken. But I was not allowed to have visits, so nobody could bring me medicine from outside. I informed the prison authorities, but they said I was acting. Finally I told a fellow prisoner and he asked his family, who were living in Rangoon, to bring me medicine to ease the pain.

Even if you can appeal the death sentence to a Higher Court the feeling is difficult. You are not being shot but you are being targeted at all times, you are being shackled, you are being hand cuffed and you are being held at gun point. This is the sort of feeling you have.

I appealed the sentence but lost the appeal and was transferred to another prison. I spent 13 years on death row.

On May 16 2011, president Thein Sein announced a reduction of sentences and that death sentences would be transformed into life imprisonment. However, I was sentenced to stay in prison until I die. It was not fair. They did not want to release me. A sentence to life imprisonment is only applicable to human trafficking crimes, not to political prisoners. There were six of us in the same unfair situation.

The day Thein Sein made his announcement I was called to the warden's office. He said to me that all death sentences had been commuted to life except for mine. He told me I was the only one not included. They just try to find ways to mentally torture you. I complained and he said: "Ok, I will ask the director". The next day he said: "OK, you are also included". After that,

when prison officials came to our cells for inspection, they would read aloud our names and sentences. The life sentence does not have attached the phrase “without release date”. However, they would read my name and they would say: “life sentence without release date”. I complained: “why do you have to do this”? Afterwards they stopped doing it.

My release order was officially issued for November 16 2012, but I was actually released three days later. They were waiting for US President Obama’s visit. That same morning we were told we were going to be released but we did not believe them. Finally we started packing and were released. The district chairman, prison warden and other officers gave speeches. Before leaving they told us we were being released under one condition; we had to sign that we would abide by law 401. According to this law if you commit any crime (even small crimes) you will be sent to prison for life. We refused to sign. We were let free.

When I was in prison I always wondered where would I go if I would be released. I had not been back to my hometown for more than 25 years. I have four siblings, but two of them have already died, as had both my parents. I had no contact with my wife for many years, and I did not know how was she. I sometimes felt I would rather stay in prison.

When we left the prison we were received by the leaders of the 88 Generation. One of the fellows who had been released with me took me to his home whilst I tried to get in touch with my friends. There were also people looking for me. They knew I had been released but did not know where I was. One friend took me to the AAPPB (Association for the Assistance of Political Prisoners Burma) office and they gave me some money. I decided to visit my hometown. I met with my nephews and nieces. They were crying. They had been told that I was already dead, that I had been executed in prison. One staff from AAPPB took me to the Thai / Burma border. Everything was new to me. News of my release had reached my wife, but she did not know when I would go back to her.

I arrived home on December 5 2012. My son is 17 years old now; when I left he was only two. (Fighter Aung)

A Pilot

They dragged and away went the seismic sound.
My beloved friend said
We will continue politics,
as we will go to jail.
My dad responded unto him,
when he returned,
He seems like a politician.
I sit in silence.

In the next two years,
I gazed at the road coming to the jail,
From the sleepy floor of Thayarwaddy prison.
An old man in 60s is coming
On the road steadily
With a pack of small prison-gifts,
by penetrating into mating orange mirages.

The silence immediately departed,
as he is my beloved dad.

Myint Aung Thant
June 8, 2007.
Vol. 1, No. 3, July-Aug-Sept 2007.





CHAPTER 5

“I would like to say the government that starting a war is easy, but rebuilding the country, the villages that have been destroyed, is not.”

If you would ask me how much has been achieved so far, it would be a very hard question to answer. It is a confusing time. Sometimes I wonder: “Am I dreaming? Am I awake? Am I there yet?” (Mya Win)

All we have endured is nothing for us; it is not for our benefit but for all people. This is something I would like people to understand. If I look back at the last 25 years, the words that come to mind are “three days”; I thought this was all we needed to achieve our objectives of democratization. (Nay Myo Htike)

I do not have big expectations for the future. But I would like people to remember that the ABSDF has stood for something; that we have a good history and have participated in the struggle. ABSDF started because of a need of history. We have committed to the best interest of the people. The struggle of the ABSDF was born from the will of the people. 25 years is a very long time. After 25 years I am still fully committed to the struggle. So many friends gave their lives, how could I not continue? (Tim Maung Tum)

The ABSDF will exist as long as there is no democracy or human rights in Burma. If one day the people decide the ABSDF is no longer needed, we will stop. We will give up our arms, but if we are needed again, we will come back. This is the students’ spirit. Students have always defended the people. (Maung Maung Taik)

If people say the ABSDF was formed because we wanted to fight I would not agree. The ABSDF was founded because of the situation at that time. It is the result of the calling of the people. We used the armed struggle as part of our political movement, to achieve our political objectives. Everyone in Burma is a victim of the dictatorship and its oppression machine. Including the Burmese army soldiers. We are not fighting against the army, we are fighting against the authoritarian rule. (Khin Kyaw)



The ABSDF has been important for Burmese History. It has contributed to many things especially to national reconciliation. Before 1988 there was much tension between ethnic people and the Burman majority. But after 1988 when we arrived at the ethnic-controlled areas, we shared our feelings, our sufferings, and at the same time we walked together in the struggle for democracy. We sacrificed our lives. That is why we gained the respect and recognition of the ethnic people. We are all victims. Not just the ethnic people, but all the people in Burma. For us at the ABSDF, we are not happy to hold guns. It is not a choice; it is a condition of our liberation. Ethnic people are not happy holding guns either, if they would have had equality, self-determination, why would they need to hold the guns? That's why I say if we want to achieve national reconciliation we have to think very deeply. We also have to see pragmatically, from a non-biased point of view. We understand that those who spent the last 20, 30 years in prison, they sacrificed their lives, they suffered, they also worked for the liberation. We understand that. At the same time, the armed struggle is not an easy way. These views we also need to reconcile. We need to pay mutual respect. Sometimes the armed struggle is undermined internationally. We understand those who do not want to support the armed resistance. They say: "you need national reconciliation, go inside and talk with the government. We fully support non-violent ways, we cannot support armed resistance movements". Yes, we understand their position. They think armed struggle is nothing. But they should not undermine it. I strongly believe that the Burmese government, even if they have all the administrative, military power, do not have moral authority. But we do have it. The people are behind us; we do not have power, we are no MPs, we are no ministers, we are no presidents, we don't have money and they are very rich, we have nothing, zero, but they cannot look down at us. When we are in the room we talk equally. History books will tell what they did to the country. They will tell about our moral authority. In the hearts of the Burman people there is a place for the ABSDF, for the student's uprising, for the democratic struggle. In the heart of the ethnic people they see the role of the ABSDF in their dreams for Federation. Yes, we need to reconcile a lot. (Ko Than Khe)

I think the struggle still continues and we have now an opportunity for the ABSDF because of the openings in the country. I think we should use this opportunity before it is too late. I think at the very least the ABSDF will be able to contribute to national reconciliation and long lasting peace inside the country; I think for that we have to go inside Burma. The study tour in December 2012 made me realise that a great opportunity has been given to the ABSDF. I believe we are in the position to lead the

process of national reconciliation based on our knowledge of the ethnic groups, on our working experience, which we have gained through the lives of hundreds of my colleagues. (Kyaw Thura)

I came from the mainland. I am Burmese. But having lived among the ethnic people for the last 25 years I feel I have become one of them. My life is one of theirs. Even if I can go home I will dedicate my life to the cause of the ethnic people, to promote their rights and to help the Burmese to understand them. For the ABSDF, we have not brought any big success to the people yet. We have not been able to improve the life of the people. But by living with the ethnic people, sharing their feelings and their lives, the ABSDF has showed them that we are trustworthy in building a future democratic country. The problem of Burma is not ethnic divisions, or ethnic inequality, it is the army as an institution. Unless we reduce the size of the institution, the size of their power, unless we withdraw them from the ethnic areas the problem will remain. If we can reform the army and reduce its size, if the ethnic people feel they can own their own territory the problem can be solved. The army is the root of Burmese problems. (Min Zaw)

I believe the decision we made 25 years ago is still correct, but we are more responsible and politically more mature now. I hope that in the future the ABSDF will be the main instrument of the peace and reconciliation processes in Burma. Our political objectives are the needs of the people of Burma. We can play a role in pushing them to be realised. We have unique experiences, and a unique understanding of the ethnic groups inside Burma. The goal of the ABSDF is to achieve peace and national reconciliation in Burma. (Khin Kyaw)

Through my time with the ABSDF I have experienced what it is to live with different types of people. For example, I have worked at the Karenni School and have always tried to understand how different nationalities feel. I think this understanding will help me contribute to national reconciliation not just amongst different ethnic groups, but also between rural and urban communities. ABSDF members have a strong understanding of these issues and this is something we can contribute. We can build bridges between different groups. The system has been systematically separating and dividing us. We have a big responsibility to restore a better system in the country. We all believe that we can do it because we have all carried the pressure and suffered for so long. (Ma Sue Pwint)





We want to carry our organisation. But we know we do not have material resources. We want to be alive, that's why we are engaged in peace talks. We want to participate in the political dialogue inside Burma. Most of the ethnic armed groups have signed ceasefire agreements with the government. I think we should do it too. This is important to bring dignity to the people. When we went inside Burma many people told us to participate in the peace process with the government. ABSDF comes from the 1988 uprising; our political image is very strong. People want us to be part of the peace process. If we do not do so we won't be able to help the Burmese people. We should enter the mainstream political process. (Myint Oo)

From my experience people want a genuine peace. They have been living in a war zone for decades. They want to have freedom of movement, of trade, of association, of expression. We have seen lots of brutalities happening in the war affected areas. That's why I think the peace process is positive. But building trust between the government and the resistance armies is the main challenge ahead. The government should be fully honest, fully transparent when engaging in the peace process. The government is the one who initiated the conflict and is responsible for building trust with the ethnic people. I am hopeful about the peace process. (Min Khant)

When peace comes I want to contribute to the education of the young people. And I would also like to help those families who lost their sons and daughters in the struggle. I have not returned to Burma. I will not go back until there is democracy. I can wait. My heart is pure for the revolution. If I die today, I think I have honoured my duties. We were not heroes. We were normal people. Normal people can also contribute to the democracy in Burma. Even if we are different (from different countries, of different religions) we are all humans. (Maung Maung Taik)

I was part of the study tour back to Burma in December 2012. Before that, I felt that the opposition movements were being dragged into being involved in the government sponsored peace initiatives, whether we liked it or not. We were being forced to accept their will. But I spent four days with

my family and friends in Loikaw and they encouraged me to continue pursuing my beliefs. They believed we could still do many things to achieve our dream.
(Ma Sue Pwint)

We have been fighting against the dictatorship in Burma since the beginning of the ABSDF. We are part of history and no one can deny this. If you want change you must have the power to push. ABSDF is part of the force pushing to move Burma ahead. Is it because the government recognises ABSDF's role that we are engaged in peace talks now. In the future ABSDF could be transformed into something else, but I hope we will continue being part of the struggle.
(Fighter Aung)





I always thought I would come back home. In the ABSDF, we are concentrating on how are we going to have a dignified return for all of us. A dignified return is a return where we can contribute to the development of the country. I have to convince myself that this is possible. But, we have to prepare our minds to be able to overcome or accept the real situation that we are going to face. For me, I want to stay with the ABSDF, in whichever shape it decides to continue. I have always believed that the ABSDF has a role to play in Burma politics. In the future I would like to work for disabled children in Burma. This is my basic goal, but please don't let me tell you the highest goal that I have for now. (Ma Sue Pwint)

The ABSDF at one point had 30, 000 members. Many of our old comrades are inside Burma now, and many have moved to other countries. We need to organise with them. I believe this working force will change the political future of Burma. The ABSDF generation is very well placed to contribute to the nation building process. 65% of ABSDF members were university students. I believe we ABSDF and all the students have a duty towards the political change of our nation. (Thant Chein Myint)

For myself, in the future I would like to continue working in the area of information. I have never regretted being part of the ABSDF over the last 25 years. I want to return home with dignity. You cannot live in a dream. You have to be realistic about the current situation. My hope is to contribute to building the country and I really believe that I will have the chance to do so. (Ko Lwan Ni)

I think what we have achieved after 25 years fighting is that everybody can see that we were not doing it for our own personal interest; people know that we could have gone abroad and had a better life, but we did not do it. We are proud of this. Do you know how in Thailand they have the King Royal Army that helps the people? I would like the ABSDF to be like that in Burma. Maybe Aung San Suu Kyi army, or General Aung San army... whichever army, but we have to go out and help the people. (Moe Kyaw Oo)

I have many plans for the future, but I cannot share them now. But I am thinking a lot about the future. But at the same time I also worry about it. I worry about all the ABSDF members. I worry about the uncertainties in the political landscape. It

looks very unstable and fragile right now. Also, because the ABSDF fights together with other groups, so our future is linked to them. We have to be careful because we live in uncertain areas. (Saw Maung Oo)

If I look back at my time with the ABSDF my main memory is about how difficult surviving in the jungle was. Armed struggle is too difficult to stand. That's why I do not want to persuade the new generation. Is too difficult. I do not want the new generation to experience the same as our generation. My mother always thought that the academic life would suit me better. If Burma was a democratic country, I would like to go back to the university campus. I just recently met again with my family for the first time. (Thant Chein Myint)

For the future I hope that ABSDF will continue being involved in the struggle for the ethnic people, for their right to self-determination, for their right to development. ABSDF is one of the organisations that understand them and hold their trust. (Khin Maung Win)

I just returned from Mandalay and our old friends welcomed us, they are waiting for us; that's what they said. They are very active now. ABSDF alone cannot achieve its objectives inside Burma, so old members, along with former political prisoners and intellectuals have to work together. (Ko Thura)

My family still lives in Burma. I have met my eldest daughter. When she got married she came to see me for my blessing. I have spent the last 25 years of my life with the ABSDF. I feel more attached to them than to my own family. I know I don't have to worry about my family; they are well off and fine. But I worry about my comrades at the ABSDF. I worry about education for their family members and their kids. They have to struggle a lot for their daily survival. It seems that I will die along with the ABSDF. ABSDF has faced many difficulties, but our family members are the most vulnerable group, the ones that has suffered the most. The future might bring even more hardship unless there is political change. (U Sue Htut)

My main feeling is that we lost our youth in the jungle. But we also have lots of experience. I did not graduate, but I feel that the jungle was my university. I have

learnt about politics, about the environment, about setting up organisations. We have touched many people. I feel very lucky for all the knowledge I have gained. And I think we can share this knowledge with the people in Burma. (Myint Oo)

For the future, I need to think about my own life and my family, about how to survive by my own. At the same time, I still have to work as part of the ABSDF, because it is people like me that formed the group. How can I fully contribute to the organisation so that it can move ahead, whilst at the same time ensuring my own survival and that of my family? This is a very heavy feeling that I carry. The future also depends on the political changes inside Burma. (Win Tin Han)

Once we achieve our political objectives, every individual of the ABSDF will need to decide by him/herself what they want to do. For me, I would like to come back to my family, and I would love to work on the family farm. (Khin Kyaw)

Personally, I would like to take a rest for two or three years. I would stay with my family and do some work for the community. We have lived very hard lives. We are tired. We should have a break. This is what I feel for myself. And then, I would like to join the army if I have a chance. This has been my childhood dream. This might not be possible according to the constitution because I am married to a foreigner. In that case, I would join a political party. (Salai Yaw Aung)

This is a moment of change. When I feel lost, I think about my time with the ABSDF, when I felt useful... my proudest moment was with the ABSDF. For a few years I decided not to take any position within the ABSDF, even if I was asked to, but now, I think we are facing a very important moment, a turning point, and everybody should concentrate on the group. At the last Central Committee meeting I was asked to be part of the Central Judiciary Department and I accepted, so I can work and provide my inputs in this important time. I have a space to contribute. (Ma Sue Pwint)

Before I left Burma I visited a woman whose son, a student, had been killed in the 1988 uprising. I do not want to come back until we have achieved the objectives her son died for. For me, in the future I might not be taking any leadership position, but I would like to share my knowledge with my community and live happily with my family. (Ma Hnounge)

Henchman

Mom!

Please don't be mad at me, as I come with a loaded gun.
It is said the rebels are everywhere among the people.

In 1988,

Those who dressed with green and white were labelled
communist.

Mom, I wonder why they have to be converted
So young.

I have met with many nervous challenges,
But I am shocked this time as they are,
Marching and marching to us, despite the gunfire,

Again I met with such young new rebels in the jungle,
Mom! as they fight bravely against us, when they get the guns.

My patron Colonel has been caring so much for me,
Mom!

He urges us not to hesitate, while engaging with such rebels.
We would be promoted,
When there is peace and tranquillity.

Geez ... mom!

You have been crying again at my words,
Is it because they make you joyful?

- Ko Zin

Vol. 2, No. 12, August 1991.





I returned to Burma for the first time since 1988 at the end of 2012 as part of the ABSDF study tour. I was worried, anxious and excited. I knew that the people inside Burma have suffered a lot, and gone through all kind of hardship. I knew it, but when I went back I could also see it. This made me realise that the ABSDF still has to work a lot, has to commit more. I felt very encouraged after meeting with the 88 Generation as well as with other opposition groups. I felt supported. I could spend some time with my family before my father passed away. It was a very emotional moment for all of us. My family is doing OK, but I could see how the people have to struggle to merely survive. There were both happy and sad moments during the study tour. (Win Tin Han)

I was part of the ABSDF delegation that visited Burma in 2012. Coming back after 25 years I saw some improvement in the country, for example, better access to my hometown. But they are not the result of the government politics but of the will of the people, who have worked and helped each other to build them. I saw more poverty. But you also see that there is more freedom of expression. My mum has already passed away, but I could meet with my brother and sister. Many people came to see me, including from political parties. I also paid a visit to the families of killed ABSDF members in three different townships. The intelligence followed me all the time; same for the rest of the delegation. But I think that's good because they could see how we are and our relationship with the people. (Saw Maung Oo)

I am the eldest son. I have one younger brother and two younger sisters. My younger brother and one younger sister still live in Loikaw. But another younger sister is in the US. I hope that all four brothers and sisters can meet here in Rangoon next year. My mum passed away in 1994, and my father in 2005. I could not make it back to come and see them. (Sonny Mahinder)

In December 2012, I returned to Burma. This trip was one of the most wonderful moments of my life. I was in the community I belong to even though I could not remember many of my close friends, my teachers, even my own place. I could not remember which was the way back to my own house so, I had to stop and ask for direction: "which one is Thida Street?" What I found is that I had always stayed in their memories. My friends remembered every

single thing they had done with me. For instance, we had once gone to play guitar in front of the house of a girl I fancied. I had totally forgotten about it, but they still remembered. They knew about the ABSDF, they knew that I had joined the struggle, they appreciated what I had been doing, but at the same time they had missed me; they want me to be back. I told them “I will return; I am not planning to stay out of the country for the rest of my life”. So, even if I was a stranger to my town that was a really wonderful moment. I was treated very warmly. I am quite certain that I need to get used to my country again before I return there for the rest of my life. For the three weeks I was there I felt like a stranger. I did not know how to use my own currency anymore! I could not remember many of my friends, even the closest ones. They often told me: “how come you do not remember me?” and since I am a major weeper tears would fall even before they finished their question, because I realised I had always been in their memories, but they have been out of mine. That’s why I would like to go back there as often as possible, because during those three weeks I started knowing about my country. But it was also hard. At one point I asked my mother to stop telling me the names of the people in my town; as we walked along she would say “Hey son, do you remember David over there?” I looked at him, tried to recall my memory... and suddenly she would add “Yes, David; Richard’s son, you don’t remember him?” so that’s already two names; whilst I was still trying to remember David I had now to add Richard. Richard, David, Richard, David... And then she would say, “Yes, they are Elisabeth’s neighbours, from Thida Street”. Who is Elisabeth? So I finally said “mother, please, do not tell me more names. Because I am having a very difficult time; I can’t decide whether to greet the people I meet in the street or not. I know their faces but I do not remember their names at all, and I am not sure whether I should say hello to them, whether they were my close friends or not”. It was so difficult! The good thing is that I know a little bit about diplomacy, thanks to the ABSDF’s Foreign Affairs Department (FAD), so I tried to be polite and make conversation with everyone, even if I had no clue of who they were. My mother was not very happy. She wanted to hold my hand and go all around the town, and show her son who was back. But I was there only for five days. I wanted to spend time with my family and with my friends, and to pay respect to my teachers if possible, even if I could not remember many of them. On that trip a guy who came to pick us up in Hpa-an, the capital of Karen State, was the

one I went to play guitar with in front of my girl's house, we got drunk together on the day our exams results came out, we graduated together. But I could not remember him at all! And he came to pick me up, even if he is currently the USDP chairman in my town. He came to pick up the ABSDF, the organisation that does not have any agreement with the government, which is still considered an illegal organisation by the government, and he is the chairman of the ruling party... I did not know all that. If I would have knew I would have told him not to come, because it could affect his career. I don't know if he cared or not. He came because he wanted to see me. Before I left my town in early January 2013, I apologised to all my friends. I told them "Guys, I am very happy to be with you. I thank you very much for your warmth. At the same time, I am very sorry that I do not remember much of the time we spent together when we were in high school. I am very sorry for that. It is not that I don't want to remember. I just can't because I have been away from home for a long time; I have had a different life. Please understand me". (Kyaw Thura)



Our four political objectives have never changed. They are still very relevant. But after 25 years the ABSDF has matured. We have had many experiences. We have made friendship with all the ethnic groups. We have gained mutual recognition. Their doubts have faded. At the same time, we worked very hard to gain their recognition. In Burma's civil war the ABSDF is the youngest army, even if we are now 25 years old. We are very happy because we have overcome the hardship and difficulties along the way. At the same time, we also feel very sad because some of our comrades, our friends cannot be with us today. They sacrificed their lives. Almost a thousand of them. Some died in action, some passed away because of malnutrition as there was no food in the jungle, they died of illnesses because there were no medicines... we lost our comrades in the storms, drowned in the rivers, because of floods... there are no words, there are no words. (Ko Than Khe)







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This has been a unique experience. It has given us the opportunity to spend time listening, understanding and collecting the story of an armed group in a moment of transformation. It has allowed us to pay attention to the individual as well as to the collective; to words as well as to images; to what is said and what is unsaid; to their past and their future.

Nerea Bilbatua
CPCS Peace Historian

CHRONOLOGY

1948: Burma gains independence.

1960: U Nu becomes Prime Minister.

1961: U Thant is elected Secretary General of the United Nations.

1962: Coup d'état lead by General Ne Win. General Ne Win abolishes the federal system and inaugurates "the Burmese Way to Socialism". The Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) becomes the sole political party in the country.

Student demonstrations against the ruling government at Rangoon University. Fifteen students are killed when the army crushes the demonstrations.

1974: (January) The Socialist Republic of the Union of Burma is established with General Ne Win as President. A new Constitution is adopted.

(December) Students' protest against government lack of recognition of U Thant, the UN former Secretary General, upon his coffins arrival in Rangoon. As part of the protests the students seize the coffin and erect a mausoleum on the grounds of the former Students Union building in the Rangoon University campus. The anti-government protest is violently suppressed by the army.

1987: Currency devaluation.

1988: (March 13) Mass student demonstrations against 26 years of one-party military. The army kills student Maung Phone Maw at the Rangoon Institute of Technology.

(August 8) Countrywide demonstrations spread against the BSPP rule. The uprising is also known as the "Four Eights Uprising". Thousands of peaceful demonstrators are shot dead by the police and the army in the streets.

(September 18) Military coup d'état led by General Saw Maung. Formation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). Many student protesters and pro-democracy activists are killed, arrested or flee to the border areas.

(September 27) The National League for Democracy is formed.

(November 1) The All Burma Students Democratic Front is formed.

- 1989: SLORC declares martial law. Thousands of political and student leaders are detained. Burma is renamed Myanmar.
- 1990: The first General election in 30 years is held. The National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi wins a landslide victory but the SLORC refuses to cede power.
The National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), an alternative government is formed on the Thai border.
- 1991: SLORC launches a large military offensive in Manerplaw.
Aung San Suu Kyi is awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
- 1992: Than Shwe replaces Saw Maung and becomes SLORC Chairman.
- 1995: (January) Manerplaw falls to SLORC and DKBO troops.
(March) The SLORC and the Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP) agree to a cease-fire. It lasts only three months.
(June) The SLORC and the New Mon State Party (NMSP) agree to a cease-fire.
- 1997: SLORC is dissolved, and a new ruling administration, the “State Peace and Development Council” (SPDC) is formed.
The country is admitted into the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).
- 2003: General Khin Nyunt becomes Prime Minister.
- 2004: General Khin Nyunt is arrested, allegedly for corruption.
KNU and the government agree to end hostilities.
- 2005: The country capital is moved to Nay Pyi Taw.
- 2007: Buddhist monks lead anti-government demonstrations across the country. The army cracks down on protestors.
- 2008: Cyclone Nargis devastates the Irrawaddy Delta.
A referendum for a new constitution is held amidst the humanitarian crisis created by Cyclone Nargis. The government announces a 99% turnout of voters and a 92.4% of voters approving the constitution.
- 2010: The first elections after 20 years of military rule are held. The Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) claim landslide victory. Opposition parties, including the NLD, boycott the elections. A week after the election Aung San Suu Kyi is released from house arrest.

2011: Thein Sein sworn in as president of a new, nominally civilian government.

President Thein Sein signs a new law allowing for peaceful demonstrations for the first time; NLD re-registers as a political party in advance of by-elections for parliament, due to be held early in 2012.

2012: Parliamentary by-elections. NLD wins in 43 out of 44 constituencies. Aung San Suu Kyi becomes a member of the Parliament.

The government abolishes pre-publication censorship, meaning that reporters no longer have to submit their copy to state censors.

Moe Thee Zun, a leader of the student protests in 1988, returns from exile.

The US President Barack Obama visits the country.

The Government signs cease-fire agreement with different armed groups (KNU, CNF, KNPP, NMSP, SSPP, RCSS and SSAS).

2013: (August 5) the ABSDF and the Karen State government sign a state-level ceasefire agreement.

(August 10) the ABSDF and the national government sign a 13 points preliminary ceasefire agreement. The agreement includes continuation of political dialogue to reach ceasefire agreement, formation of independent monitoring committee for ceasefire, opening of liaison offices, and setting a date to hold union level political dialogue.

There is something intangible about the ABSDF that is hard to understand. We were young when we left our homes. We only thought about fighting, nothing else. We were thousands of students. When we left, our families stayed back praying for those kids to be safe. They were always worried about us, praying for our safety. But we never thought about them. We totally forgot our families. There was one incident with the Burmese army in the Brigade No. 6 KNU area. The senior KNU officer had to go back to the border, so he put an inexperienced junior officer in command of the ABSDF column. Because of his lack of experience we became an easy target for the Burmese army. That night at around 9pm they opened fire on us and we were totally unprepared, we could not shoot back. We started retreating and finally reached a safe place at about 4am. Luckily nobody was wounded after a night of fighting, maybe because our families were praying for us; that's the intangible, the untouchable. I have this image of how our families always helped us. There are different types of support. Some you can see, some you cannot. (Ko Kyaw Ko)

“ We have memories of all the places where we have lived in the liberated areas. We have memories of all the people we have fought with. We miss mother and father, we miss brother and sister, we miss home sometimes, because we are human beings. ”



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All Burma Students
Democratic Front

The All Burma Students Democratic Front was formed in November 1st, 1988. The ABSDF has been fighting against the military dictatorship and for democracy, human rights and federalism.

STRUGGLE FOR PEACE

THE 25 YEAR JOURNEY OF THE ABSDF

Arno Pro
Bold

Calibri
Not Bold