

Karen Christians in Burma Wait for Help as They Face Persecution

After suffering 50 years, this ethnic group is trapped today between the country's renegade military and global heroin trade

Government soldiers in Burma had captured an ethnic Karen pastor and his wife. They held them in the middle of their village while other soldiers who had been ordered into the surrounding area returned with people who would witness what was about to happen.

As the assembled villagers looked on, the pastor and his wife were stripped, and the woman was raped by five of the soldiers. The couple were then killed.

In another village, soldiers threatened to burn a church if the pastor didn't recant Christianity. The pastor refused and said he would rather remain with his church. The soldiers burned the structure, and the pastor was killed in the fire.

While the building burned, the soldiers gathered known Christians in the village and under the glare of gunpoint commanded them to recant their faith. They refused and also were killed.

These incidents of martyrdom are common among the 4 million Karen Christians in Burma (also known as Myanmar). The Karen, a Burmese ethnic group of 10 million people, are a target of genocide for the country's military regime.

"This is what the Karen have been suffering for the last 50 years," said Timothy Lacklem, founder of Asian Tribal Ministries (ATM).

Recently Lacklem and Lt. Col. Nadar Mya, a charismatic Christian who is also the son of the vice president, visited several U.S. congressmen to discuss the plight of the Karen people. Lacklem and Nadar told these officials the genocidal campaign against the Karen stemmed from the country's heroin trade (60 percent of the world's heroin originates in Burma), government allegiance to Buddhism and a lack of government authority for the Karen people.

The underground drug industry has created a renegade military that forces tribes to grow the poppies used to make heroin. The Karen have suffered not only because of their faith, but also because they refuse to participate in the drug trade.

Instead, Christian Karens hold on to their faith, believing for God's intervention. Nadar experienced firsthand what he calls God's divine intervention in a key military battle that was broadcast on the British Broadcasting Corp.'s (BBC) news network.

"We had 40 soldiers, and the enemy had 200," Nadar said. "The enemy troops signed a covenant to fight until they were dead. I told my soldiers that I was a Christian and that I loved them and was believing for a mighty deliverance."

Nadar called the BBC and told them about the upcoming battle because he wanted the whole world to witness God's hand of protection.

“I prayed for my soldiers, even Buddhists,” he explained. “I expected the battle to take from 10 hours to a day.”

After the prayer, which the BBC televised, Nadar and his soldiers defeated their enemy in 15 minutes. Fleeing soldiers said they had heard a booming voice that terrified them. It was a landmark victory, and Nadar said his Buddhist soldiers converted to Christianity.

Lacklem, a Karen who grew up in the jungle, said he doesn't want his people to get handouts, but a “hand up.”

“I teach them how to fish and farm,” he said. The second largest Thai city, Chiang Mai is Lacklem's home while his wife Rebecca and their five children live in Australia.

“Because of death threats on my life, it was necessary for my wife and children to live in Australia,” he said. He visits his family three times a year.

-Leilani Haywood