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 **On the Run: In Burma's Jungle Hell**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

**On the Run:
In Burma's Jungle Hell**

Thierry Falise (bio)



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—A Young Boy Peers Out of a Bamboo Hut in Saw Wa der, a Displaced Persons Community in the Jungles of the Northern Karen State, Where He Lives with His Family After Being Forced to Abandon His Village by the Burmese Army.

Lush forests, raging rivers, and steep hills circle Burma's central plain from west to east like a giant horseshoe. It is an idyllic landscape, home to Hsar K'Tray Saw, a 13-year-old Karen boy who lost his sight when a landmine planted by Burmese soldiers exploded outside his village. It is also where a 37-year-old mother was gang raped by half a dozen soldiers in a rice field; where the body of an unknown porter lays rotting down a jungle trail, shot as he was trying to escape enslavement by the Burmese Army; where old, young, and infirm villagers alike grab their few possessions and flee into the jungle, hiding from merciless army patrols like hunted game for weeks, months, sometimes years. In short, this is a land of fear.

Ethnic minorities make up 30 percent to 40 percent of Burma's estimated 55 million population and occupy 60 percent of the territory. They are Chin, Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Mon, Rakhine, Shan, Wa, to name **[End Page 57]** the largest and better known nationalities. From the earliest days, these ethnic people have stood up to the Burmese government, proclaiming their determination to pursue an independent way of life. But rulers in Rangoon were not content to allow minorities to control the vast natural resources of these territories. In the late 1960s, the military regime launched a massive counter-insurgency strategy in those territories called the "Four Cuts" policy. They aimed to push the insurgents from central Burma into the nation's more remote, mountainous areas, cutting off support from the local population (food,

money, intelligence, and new recruits). The generals mapped the country into black, brown, and white zones—respectively, guerrilla-controlled, mixed government-insurgency control, and government-controlled. In the “black zones,” soldiers were given license to shoot at will.

The policy amounted to an endless and efficient ethnic cleansing campaign that continues today. Burmese soldiers, emboldened by a system that ensures total impunity, have engaged in murder, rape, torture, destruction, looting, forced labour, and child conscription. The army’s daily oppression also prevails in the brown zones, although with a less brutal but more insidious façade, dubbed “Burmanization”—the gradual replacement of local tribes by ethnic Burmese settlers. Life in the brown zones depends entirely on local commanders’ good, or more often bad, moods. Reports of forced labor, economic exploitation, and all varieties of harassment are ever present.

According to the relief organization Thailand Burma Border Consortium, between 1996—the year of the first comprehensive survey—and 2009, some 3,506 villages in eastern Burma, the area most deeply affected by military oppression, were destroyed, abandoned, or forcibly relocated into communities under the army’s control. Over 600,000 people have been displaced.

Pursued relentlessly, 13 armed ethnic groups agreed on a cease-fire with the junta from 1989 to the mid-1990s. Today, only a handful of armed organizations—mainly the Karen National Union, the Karenni National Progressive Party, and the Shan State Army-South—are still resisting the regime. But “cease-fire groups,” among them the powerful Wa and Kachin along the Chinese border, are increasingly ill at ease with the junta’s new strategy to transform them into militias under its control before the general election planned for the end of this year.

The innocents caught in the middle of the fighting were basically left alone to their miserable destiny—until 1997, when a former U.S. Special Forces soldier involved in relief work along the Thai border founded the Free Burma Rangers (FBR), an armed humanitarian relief group. They

began to train young volunteers from ethnic minorities on the basics of medical treatment, relief, rebuilding, and psychological counselling. Organized as mobile teams, they are dispatched from Thailand into black and brown zones, usually for a few months, where...

PORTFOLIO

Thierry Falix is a Belgian photographer and writer based in Bangkok. He is the author of the novel Les Petits Généraux de Yadana (Anne Carrière Editions, 2005); the first French biography of the Burmese pro-democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi, Le Jasmin ou la Lune (Florent Matton Editions, 2007); and Le Châtiment des Rois (Florent Matton, 2009) on the devastating toll of Cyclone Nargis. He has covered Burma, legally and clandestinely, for more than 20 years.



On the Run: In Burma's Jungle Hell



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