

Letter from Three Pagodas Pass

By A Correspondent

The small group of Mon and Karen officers sat in the dim light of the boarded up shop, sharing some Thai whiskey. Outside on the main street their soldiers mingled and lounged in empty shop fronts. This was the centre of town, the front line between the two anti-government rebel armies. The officers raised their glasses: "The Mon and Karen are brothers" they agreed.

Most civilians had evacuated the town three weeks earlier, in late June, after some skirmishes between the two groups in the interior of Burma. "Accidents" both sides called the clashes but civilians were not reassured, they knew what was coming.

The uneasy peace continued as the soldiers killed time and their leaders talked. Every day brought the same disappointing news: no agreement. Just a few days before the fighting started a party of French tourists wandered down the main street in the afternoon drizzle, picking their way between the mud puddles and the freshly dug bunkers, already half full of rain.

The waiting ended with a thunderous pre-dawn barrage on July 23rd as the Karen National Union (KNU) began an offensive to push the New Mon State Party (NMSP) out of the Three Pagodas area.

At first the Mon proved to be almost as dogged on the battle field as they had been at the negotiating table, but a month after the fighting started the Karen appeared to have gained the upper hand. "The Karen obviously

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underestimated the strength of the Mon", said an observer in the border region.

Although impossible to get an accurate figure for casualties one source put the total at more than 300 dead, including civilians. "It's a small war but heavy fighting. A cease-fire in late August silenced the guns, temporarily at least.

The Three Pagodas area has been under Karen control since the beginning of their war with Rangoon more than 40 years ago. While there are Karen villages in the area Three Pagodas Pass was nothing more than a handful of houses in the late 1960s. As the Burmese economy deteriorated the village grew, thriving on the flow of black market goods from Thailand.

Through the 1950s and 1960s the KNU supported the fledgling Mon resistance. The Karen let the NMSP set up its headquarters a few kilometres from the village in 1969 shortly afterwards the Mon opened their tax gate. The Mon army at this time was an insignificant military force. Indeed, until very recently the Mon group was amongst the smallest in the league of rebel armies.

The 1983-84 government offensive against Karen bases and trading posts along the border to the north was good news for the Mon. Trade shifted south and Three Pagodas boomed. Earlier this year both groups reported making about 1,000,000 Baht a month each from a tax on trade.

This financial windfall for the Mon party has coincided with a reawakening of Mon nationalism in the region. In the last couple of years the Mon army has expanded from just a few hundred to about 1,000 well-armed troops, according to one Bangkok-based observer. Officially the

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Mon say that they have 3,000 troops.

At the same time the town also grew. Large numbers of Mon people moved up from the coastal region, and there were smaller influxes of Burmese Moslems, ethnic Chinese and Shan people. About two thirds of the town's estimated 2,500 people are Mon.

Although invariably unwilling to express any interest in politics many of the minority people, especially the Moslems, support the Karen. A small force of Moslem soldiers fights in the Karen army and is based at Three Pagodas. The mosque in the village is just a few metres from the Karen church. When the war broke out Moslem civilians who had taken refuge on the Thai side of the border feared attacks from Mon soldiers.

"We are two different people with different languages and traditions. We cannot have two political systems in the same area." Some months before the fighting Mahn Aung Htay, KNU district political officer, explained why the KNU was demanding the delineation of Mon and Karen areas.

The recently expanded Mon army had begun operating in areas which the Karen regarded as theirs. The KNU wanted a border drawn. "Ofcourse we must have borders, for 40 years we have been fighting for land", explained a senior KNU official.

Perhaps unwilling to be pushed into a territorial settlement while still relatively weak the Mon resisted. "During the revolutionary period we need areas in which we can manoeuvre. There must be no accurate or permanent demarcation at this time", explained Nai Tin Aung, a senior NMSP official.

Instead of drawing borders the Mon proposed that they

administer Mon-majority areas and the Karen administer Karen-majority areas with Three Pagodas under joint administration. The Karen rejected this which would have meant them giving up areas they have controlled for decades, and they saw no reason to give up any authority at Three Pagodas.

While acknowledging weakness in the past the Mon have begun to see themselves as strong enough to take over responsibility for the areas which they regard as rightfully theirs. "We are not claiming an inch of Karen territory, only Mon territory", explained NMSP Vice President Nai Nonla.

Numerous rounds of negotiations at various levels failed to produce a compromise. While the two sides stuck to their positions the tension rose. An apparently minor dispute over selection of the village's governing committee caused near-panic among civilians in April and convinced many that fighting was inevitable.

At some stage the KNU leadership also reached the conclusion that negotiations would not produce a settlement. With the Mon group growing in strength Karen leaders probably reasoned that if there had to be a fight, the sooner the better. And perhaps also at the back of leaders' minds was the turmoil inside Burma and the possibility of a new government. Areas under the control of groups are unlikely to be relinquished in the course of negotiations with Rangoon for peace or the reorganisation of the federal system.

While the immediate future of Three Pagodas remains uncertain its long-term prospects are surely assured. For centuries soldiers, refugees, pilgrims and traders have been tramping through these hills which lie more or less

half way along a straight line drawn between Rangoon and Bangkok.

Who knows, perhaps in the years to come the most common visitors will be passengers on the night train to Rangoon. Whether those future travellers arrive in Karen or Mon state is currently being determined.

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