A photograph of two children playing in a dirt yard. A girl in a red patterned dress is jumping towards a yellow balloon, while a boy in a blue shirt and patterned skirt runs alongside her. The background shows a simple building and some greenery.

# BURMA TAKES OFF

*After many years as a closed dictatorship, Burma has opened its borders. Tourists and foreign investors are streaming in while the young people are leaving the country – often at the risk of their own lives.*

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TEXT SOPHIE ARNÖ PHOTO PAUL HANSEN



Coming here is like entering a time warp!«

Thomas Henseler, Manager of The Governor’s Residence Hotel. Here with good friend Philippe Mei, a businessman from Singapore.



Thomas Henseler, 45, draws deeply on his cigar and leans back in his generously-proportioned rattan chair in the Kipling Bar. On the table in front of him, a bottle of the very best local wine. The floodlit pool twinkles below the balcony railing. Lotus ponds. And flickering lamps on the tables where the hotel guests are taking dinner. It is going well now.

»Occupancy rates have more than doubled over the last two years,« he observes. The fact that room prices start at USD 460 per night does not appear to be any problem. »The people who come to Myanmar are rich tourists. People who have been everywhere. You could say that Burma is the flavour of the year.« His hotel, The Governor’s Residence here in Yangon, is the colonial hotel that everyone wants to stay at. It is surrounded by landscaped gardens with period furniture, teak flooring and oriental detail.

»This is one of the factors that mean that Yangon really has a chance at becoming the Paris of the East,« he continues. »It is so rich in architecture, in colonial buildings.« »Our guests also appreciate the friendliness of the people. There is still genuine hospitality here. Tourism is in its infancy and has not yet had time to become an industry, a machine like in Thailand.« Not only tourists have begun to discover Burma. Since the country opened its borders, foreign investors have also been streaming in.

»It is a kind of gold rush,« notes Thomas Henseler. »When I took over as manager just over a year ago, you could almost touch the sense of expectation in this country, it was so strong. Things were actually going to change! Now, everything is happening!« But not for everyone. »Aung San Suu Kyi? Who is that?« wonders Daw Lay Yee, 67. Then she stops and disappears into her thoughts for a moment before she continues: »Well, I think I’ve seen her. She looks like me!« The village where we meet, six hours’

drive from Yangon, is near the Thai border. Coming here is like entering a time warp to a hundred years back in time. Unlike in Yangon, where the number of cars has increased and short skirts have begun appear as well as an occasional mobile phone, here you are reminded that Burma remains one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. Seventy percent of the population work in agriculture. One in three live on less than USD 3 per day. In rice paddies, oxen drag carts balancing on warped

wooden wheels. Here the transformation the country is currently undergoing is still an abstraction. The process of democratisation. The liberation of San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners. The peace agreements with armed rebel groups. The easing of censorship in the media. Instead, it is mostly about trying to make ends meet. Not only have they no income, many families are deep in debt. »When the harvest is bad, we have to borrow,« explains Daw Lay Yee. One way of earning money is to go to neighbouring Thailand to work.



More than half of the twenty children in kindergarten in the village of Kawt Ka Lway have been left by their parents and now live with their grandparents.



**BURMA IN BRIEF:**

- \* Population: 55-60 million.
- \* Economy: One of the world's poorest and least developed countries. A third of the population living on less than USD 3 per day.
- \* 70% working in agriculture.
- \* The majority are Buddhists.
- \* Many different ethnic groups.
- \* Weak judiciary.
- \* Hard hit by natural disasters.
- \* Rich in natural resources.



*The Irrawaddy River is the main artery running through Burma.*



*Saung and Moe are both 17 years old. They were lured by the promise of jobs at a restaurant. It turned out to be a massage parlour.*



*The children who have been left by their parents find security in each other at the kindergarten in the village of Kawt Ka Lway.*



*In a poor country like Burma there are no modern tools to make life easier for families with children.*



*Many people paint their faces with thanaka, a yellow paste made from the bark of a tree, to protect themselves against the sun and because it is beautiful.*

## THE SITUATION FOR CHILDREN:

- \* Children under 18 make up 35% of the population.
- \* One in three children is malnourished.
- \* Many children suffer from treatable diseases such as pneumonia, diarrhoea and malaria.
- \* Only half the children finish primary school.
- \* There are few employment opportunities for young people and many go abroad, often to Thailand or China, in search of jobs.

Daw Lay Yee, 67, is responsible for her grandson Myo Kyaw Kyaw, 12.

When I was young, no one left the village.



Practically none of the inhabitants of villages like this are between 14 and 40 years old. There are only small children and the elderly.

Daw Lay Yee's daughter has also gone and left her son with his grandmother.

»He was only two years old when she went,« she says, casting a glance at her grandchild Myo Kyaw Kyaw, now twelve years old. Wide-eyed, he follows our conversation as it is translated by the interpreter. When the subject of his mother comes up, he stubbornly presses back his tears.

»He never asks about his mother, but he is angry that she has gone,« says his Grandmother.

»I don't want to ask anything!« says the lad with angry emphasis.

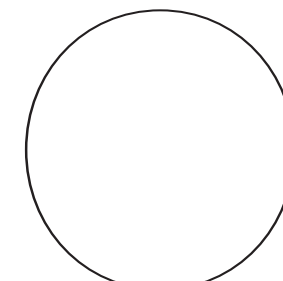
Then he gets tired of talking to us and goes to play with one of family's three kittens.

»At the beginning, she sent money home, but the last eight years we have heard nothing,« continues Daw Lay Yee outraged.

»I would like to look her up and tell that her son needs a bike!«

Then she falls silent and his eyes show she is deep in her thoughts again. Her mouth half open, teeth red from chewing betel.

»When I was young, no one left the village,« she finally says.



ne explanation for the increasing numbers leaving Burma's impoverished rural areas is the exchange rate.

Previously the Thai Baht and Burmese Kyat were equal in value. Today the rate is 28 Kyats for one Baht. It has become more profitable to work in the neighbouring country. The ability to help family is hard to resist for many people. As is the dream of being able to buy new clothes and gadgets for themselves. Around two million Burmese have travelled to neighbouring countries, mainly Thailand and China, to work. But the price is high. Not only in terms of broken relationships.

Most migrants cross the border illegally, without valid identification documents so they cannot go to the police if they become victims of violence or other abuse. The traffickers, known as brokers, regularly visit villages with promises of well-paid jobs across the border but they take no responsibility whatsoever for disclosing the working conditions or the risks involved.

»I didn't know anything except that

I had been promised a job,« says Aung Myint Than, 20, who is one of the few young men who are now back in the village after a trip to the neighbouring country.

He was 15 years old when a broker came and offered him a job in Thailand.

»I had always wanted to go there,« says Aung Myint Than. »I wanted to help because my family is one of the poorest here. I have seven brothers and sisters and wanted to earn some money so that we could build a house.« Several young people went together and they did actually get jobs at a restaurant.

»That was an okay job. But it was different to what I had imagined. We did not go out but were locked up at the restaurant where we also lived. We worked twelve hours per day and only got a day off every three months. I felt lonely and unhappy, had no one to talk to.«

But he was earning USD 95 a month which he sent home to his family.

»That's why I went. I had no choice.«

After two years at the restaurant, through a relative, he got to start working at a sewing factory, also in Thailand. Here he would earn more than double. But he was unfamiliar with the work and the safety measures on the machines were poor.



*Aung Myint Than lost both his hands when working at a factory in Thailand. Now he's back home and does what he can to help his six younger brothers and sisters and his aunt. Both his parents are dead.*

## SAVE THE CHILDREN IN BURMA:

*Save the Children has worked in Myanmar since 1995. Today, there are 750 employees. Mostly local staff working for the organisation in 25 offices spread across the country.*

*The focus of operations includes:*  
*\* Child safety and protection, including rehabilitation of child soldiers.*  
*\* Children's rights promoted, for example, through the establishment of committees for children and adults.*  
*\* Education.*  
*\* Nutrition and livelihood.*  
*\* Prevention of HIV and AIDS.*  
*\* Children's health and survival.*  
*\* Disaster prevention.*

» One day, when I had just begun, I fell and got my hands caught in one of machines. They sort of ground on while I desperately tried to pull them out,« he says matter-of-factly. »All I could think was, this can't be happening to me! I am supposed to be taking care of my family.«

A colleague heard his screams and turned off the machine. After several months in hospital, he was back with his family in their village. Now with no hands.

»Who will want me now?« he wonders rhetorically in answer to my question about the future.

In Yangon's poorer suburbs the traffickers carry out raids after children they can sell. Daww Nyunt Win is 48 years old, a widow and mother of three boys aged 11, 17 and 19.

»My two oldest sons were 15 and 17 year old when a woman came to our area and offered them work,« she says. »We had confidence in her.«

Since then Daww Nyunt Win has not heard from her children. But now she knows where they are: in a factory just southeast of the Thai border. She has

been told that they live as slave labourers enduring terrible conditions. Two boys, Naing Linn and Myo Ko, managed to escape from same factory and they have told her about it. We meet Daww Nyunt Win and the two teenage boys at the International Save the Children Centre for Child Protection in the area where they live.

»It is a large, closed and heavily guarded factory area with seven factories and about a thousand employees. The workers are controlled by armed guards,« the boys tell us both talking at the same time.

»We were set to peel mangoes which we then put on ice. We worked from three in the afternoon until eight in the morning, 17 hours in a row. It was cold in the room and a lot of people became ill. Then they were given tablets, we don't know what they were.«

They slept in a dormitory with twenty other young people, both boys and girls, straight on the concrete floor. The door was locked from the outside and guards never let them out of their sight.

»If anyone felt ill and was not able to



*Thura Soe misses his older brothers.*

work they were beaten. The guards said that they could shoot us whenever they wanted to – no one would know if we died there.«

It was not until they arrived at the factory that the boys were told that they would receive pay only after three years' work and that before that time had passed, they would not be allowed any contact with their families.

»I was so sad and crying when I realised we were trapped,« says Naing Linn. »I had hoped that I would get a good salary, save and then, after one year, to go home and buy a piece of land for my family. The other employees warned me not to try to escape. Some people who had tried it had been shot and their bodies dumped in the river.«

But the boys still took the risk. They found an escape route out of the factory – the garbage disposal. On the other side of the wall they ran into some friendly people who helped them get on a bus back to Burma. Once in Yangon they went

straight to the police. This was two years ago and nothing has happened.

»Instead, our story has been questioned by the police several times,« said Myo Ko. The woman who brought them to

*»I fear for their lives,« she says. »I don't know what is happening to them. Maybe they're dead?«*

Thailand, however, has good contacts and continues to recruit children. Several people have seen her in the area where Daww Nyunt Win, Naing Linn and Myo Ko live.

Daww Nyunt Win's body is so fragile she gives the impression that she would blow away at the slightest puff of wind. Her face is lined with worry. She prays every day for her sons to be freed. She has tried to get in contact with them – but gets no help, not from the police or the authorities on either side of the border.

»I fear for their lives,« she says. »I don't



*Daww Nyunt Win grieves for her two oldest sons.*

know what is happening to them. Maybe they're dead?«

She looks around the little rickety house on stilts where she and her 11-year-old son live. The roof is covered

with leaves which are no protection against wind and water during the rainy season. They have almost nothing other than the straw mat they sleep on and a pair of metal containers to cook food in. But out of a small chest, she takes

a photo album. Her eyes linger on the picture of the two expectant teenagers, her eldest sons who were supposed to be her security in her old age. Eleven-year-old Thura Soe sits silent next to his mother. But then he starts to cry.

»I miss my brothers,« he says. »I want them to come back.«

He has left school to work long days as a construction worker. He earns less than a dollar a day but enough to support himself and his mother with her heart condition.

»Please do what you can to help us!« ➔

says Daww Nyunt Win when we leave the meeting with heavy hearts.

How can you balance these endless proofs of exploitation, violence, anger, sadness and resignation with the positive changes that have taken place and the sense of expectation now prevailing in the country?

»The fact that people can talk openly about their suffering, their thoughts and their experience means increased opportunities to support them,« says Min Win Bo who works for International Save the Children in the district we visited earlier.

On the way from there to Yangon we meet a protest march led by a Buddhist monk called Ahin Panditamanda, 34. Fifty people will walk for 45 days from Yangon to Kachin State.

»We are tired of the President speaking

about peace without anything happening,« he says, referring to the armed conflicts that are ongoing between the government army and minority ethnic groups in the northern parts of the country.

Almost 100 000 people of the Kachin ethnic group have been forced to leave their homes and many civilians have been killed during Burmese army offensives.

»The Government has announced that they will take us to court for our demonstration, but that threat can't stop us. Our goal is Peace!« he asserts.

And after several days of walking they have still not been stopped. Not long ago, a similar action would have been impossible in Burma. In 2007 a dozen monks were killed as they demonstrated for democracy. A series of issues are now

hanging in the air. Will the political and economic reforms that the country is undergoing result in increased prosperity and new opportunities for everyone? Will this help children? Will freedom be created – and will it last?

Thomas Henseler at The Governor's Residence, taking a sip of wine and puffing smoke from his cigar.

»It depends. In a year perhaps everything will be lost. In Asia, everything changes very quickly. Look at our neighbours. Slowly a critical mass is formed. You wake up and you could be anywhere.«

He believes there is a risk that the country's leadership is so eager to become competitive that they are selling out everything and everyone.

»My hope is that the government succeeds in take care of the people. ✕

# NO MORE CHILDREN AT WAR!

*Burma's government has signed an agreement with the UN that they will release all underage soldiers from its army. Aung, Kyaw and Win and are already back with their families. But their memories still haunt them.*

TEXT SOPHIE ARNÖ PHOTO PAUL HANSEN



## SURVEY: How can children contribute to peace and development in Burma?

### KHIN MA MA, 14

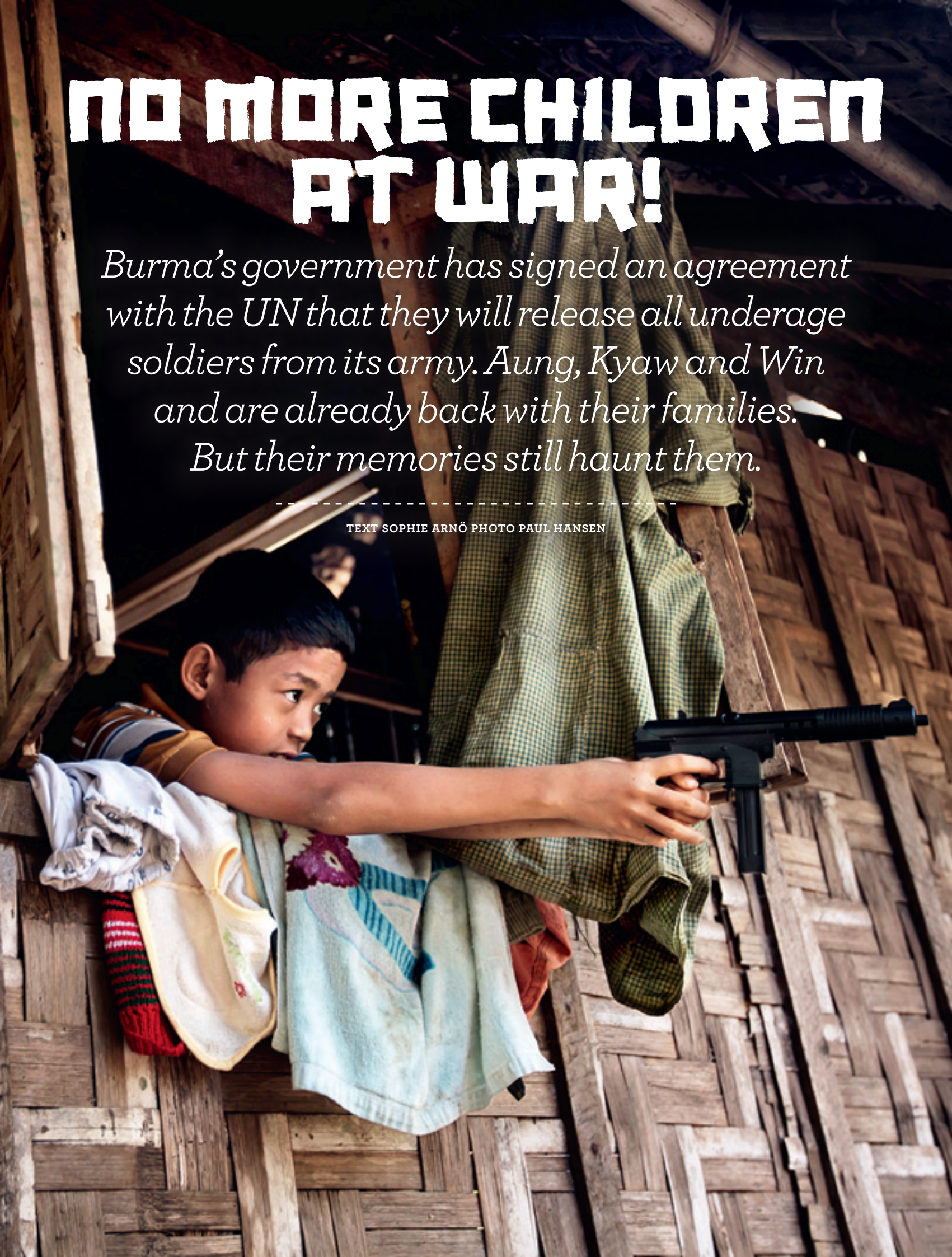
If the children can go to school and educate themselves then the country will develop. It is also important that children are happy. I am very sorry that I had to quit school. My parents could not afford the USD 15 for tuition. I would like to be a teacher or an engineer, but now I work at a clothing factory. I earn USD 0.15 per hour and work 12 hours straight, from eight in the morning until eight at night.

### WAI LWIN OO, 13

The fact that the poor become better off is important to help the country develop. I had to drop out of school four years ago because we could not afford to pay school fees. My mother does not work. My father is a day labourer, he tears down buildings. I would like to become a social worker and help those who are poor, sick or homeless.

### KYI KYI WIN, 15

Children are very important if the country is to develop. However, everyone must be more involved in making sure children's morals and behaviour are right. They must build roads, hospitals and help the poor. Everyone must want to participate and not be selfish. I wanted to go to school but had to quit now in ninth grade because my parents couldn't pay school fees. I don't have a job.





**AUNG, AGED 16**

*Was held prisoner and tortured by the border police before they sold him to the army.*  
*»I thought of trying to escape,« he says. »But the building was fenced off, there were security guards with guns and dogs. All I could think about was my mother.«*  
*With the help of Save the Children, his mother did manage get her son released in May 2011.*

**FACTS CHILD SOLDIERS:**

- \* There are around 300,000 child soldiers in the world.*
- \* They are used in armed conflicts, as guards, cooks, carriers, mine sweepers, and sex slaves.*
- \* The number of child soldiers in Burma is unknown.*
- \* Most soldiers who are under 15 years old are found in non-state military organisations.*
- \* Many children are abducted into military service. Others volunteer for the army, driven by poverty, abuse or discrimination. Others want revenge for crimes committed against their families.*
- \* The use of children in armed conflict is prohibited by the Children’s Convention. The International Criminal Court at The Hague considers it to be a war crime.*

*Sources: UN, Human Rights Watch, Child Soldiers International.*

»There was one man that hit me. The others looked on. I was so afraid! I had no choice but to accept.«

It has been two years since Aung, now 16, was captured, sold and forced into Tatmadaw, the Burmese army. Still his face goes dark when he talks about what happened. Deep lines form between his eyebrows.

»No one told me about the risks.«

Like many others in his village he was lured by a trafficker with the promise of a job in Thailand. It was early in January 2011, and Aung was 14 years old. The small group of young people were wading across the border river at night when a police car

suddenly appeared on the Thai side.

»I didn’t really know what was happening, so I was still standing there when the others ran,« he says.

The police took him back to the border and handed him over to the Border Police on the Burmese side. He was locked up, tortured and terrorised for three days.

»They wanted me to volunteer to go with them to the army. If you do not say yes, we will put you in prison, they said. I begged and pleaded. Told them my mother was old. But they didn’t care.«

Instead, they beat him and threatened to kill him if he did not do what they said.

»I saw that they got money for me when they finally turned me over to a

military recruitment centre.«

Aung’s story is not unique. Several organisations, including the UN, have documented the extensive recruitment and use of child soldiers in Burma for many years. The previous military junta strenuously denied its existence. Armed conflicts between the government army and several of the country’s ethnic minorities have been underway for more than 50 years. They have claimed thousands of lives and resulted in massive violations of human rights.

»Child soldiers often get the dangerous jobs like clearing mines,« says Kelland Stevenson, Director of the Save the Children Office in Burma. »They also

have to stand guard, load weapons and take part in combat operations. Both in the government army and in those of the armed ethnic groups. Children are recruited for a number of reasons. It has been difficult to maintain the number of soldiers when so many are killed in battle. The military is very hierarchical and male and has made children do all the dirty jobs no one else wants to do. The younger they are, the worse they are treated.«

There are also socio-economic factors. Burma is one of the poorest countries in the world. A child who enlists in the army is paid USD 30 – 45 per month. Anyone who recruits a child is also paid.

Consequently, there is extensive trafficking of young people.

Win, 15, and Kyaw, 17, were both kidnapped and sold. We meet them at the International Save the Children Support Centre in a poor suburb of Yangon, where former child soldiers have the opportunity to study in order to catch up with what they missed in school. They can also train for different jobs and, not least, receive financial support to start up a business. Another vital aspect – the chance to meet each other and exchange experiences.

Win was just twelve years old when he was conscripted.

»I was walking home from school

when a man came up to me and asked if I wanted to meet my older brother, who was in army. Of course I wanted to. Then he told me to go with him. I did not talk to my parents, he said he would contact them.«

They drove all night.

»When we arrived the next morning I understood that I had been tricked.«

The stranger had taken Win to a military training centre.

»I was locked in a dark room for three days without food and water. I was terrified, could not think clearly, it was so dark. I longed for my mother. At night, when the guards were drunk they came in and beat me.«



*The local youth group has meant a lot to both Kyaw and Win, here together with one of leaders Aung Lwin Oo. »I myself am a father and become very sad when I hear that these lads were forced to go through what no child should have to experience,« he says.*



When his resistance was broken down, Win was taken to another training centre to learn how to handle weapons. After four months, he was transferred to the front in Kachin State, where he stayed for two years.

»It was as if my life died,« he says, »I never thought I would get out of there alive.«

Kyaw, who still looks like a slender young boy, listens seriously and attentively to Win's story.

»I get sad when I hear that« he says. »It reminds me of my own life.«

Kyaw was 13 years old and was selling balloons on the street when he met two traffickers. The two men asked if he wanted a better job.

»They said I should go with them and they would inform my parents.«

Win was taken many miles away and sold at a recruiting centre in another city. There he learned to use weapons and how to kill people in battle.

»The thought of killing someone. . . I did not want to, not at all. When I told this to my sergeant he threatened to kill me. The guns were very heavy, our kit could weigh up to 20 pounds and we were small. At first I was really scared, but then I got used to it.«

Both Win and Kyaw describe how they and the other children were tortured, forced to eat rotten food, take drugs,

be with prostitutes, drink and do »other stupid things'.

»All the children were given two bottles of liquor every month,« says Kyaw. »I pretended to drink, then I sold mine.«

Win tells us how he saw friends becoming addicted when they started using drugs, often smoking heroin.

»It was scary! They just got old really quickly.«

*»I was locked in a dark room for three days without food and water. I was terrified, I could not think clearly, it was so dark.«*

Some went mad. Some just sat staring straight out into nothing. They were completely cut off. Some died when they were only 15 years old. He did try drugs himself at times but decided not to in the end because the effect frightened him.

»I prayed to Buddha every night that I would see mum and dad. The idea that I would one day come back to them was what kept me alive.«

On one occasion the country's highest general visited the reception centre where Kyaw was and asked if there were any child soldiers there.

»Our general hid us and denied that our existence.«

After a couple of years Kyaw, Win and Aung managed to find different ways of getting letters out to their parents.

While Aung is telling us his story his mother Daw Htwe is listening. She was terribly frightened when he suddenly disappeared and there was no sign of life from him.

»But then the letter came in which he told me that he had been recruited to the army. I cried with joy when I understood that he was alive. But I was also upset. He was only 15 years old and had no business being in the army!«

Daw Htwe was a member of one of the many local committees for child protection created in recent years. Through the group she came into contact with the Save the Children office in the nearest town. She got help from them to obtain the document, recommendations and certificate required. Evidence that her son was still a minor.

»It was a complicated bureaucratic process. I could never done it alone!«

After a six-month long struggle to get her son free, Aung was released in May 2011.

Kyaw came home in early June the same year, and Win in early 2012.

Six months later, in late June 2012, the Burmese government signed an agreement with the UN in which they promised to identify and release all child ➔



## WIN, 15

*»The very worst experience was torture at night. It was as if they were looking for someone to punish.«*

*He was only twelve years old when he was kidnapped and sold to the army.*

*»I had to grow up fast,« he says. Today Win works as a guard at an Embassy in Yangon. His plans for the future are to continue helping his mother and father to support the family.*



**KYAW, 17**  
*was a prisoner in the army for three years. Only when his mother managed to obtain a certificate that proved that he was a minor was he released. »When I got home, a lot had changed. My brothers and sisters had grown up. My parents' business was going badly. But I was so happy to see mum again! And that I had survived!« International Save the Children has provided Kyaw with financial help to start a small business. He has now bought a small food cart that he pulls around the area where he lives and sells salads he makes himself. From this he earns around USD 6 a day and can provide for his entire family.*



soldiers in the government army before 2015. 42 children have already been released and more are expected to be freed this year. The UN is overseeing the process.

This agreement, entitled the Joint Action Plan, also provides a framework for the prevention of future recruitment of child soldiers, among other measures they have developed routines for age checks, carry out rigorous independent monitoring of agreement implementation and take legal action against those who are in violation of it.

»We will support the government in their work to stop children participating in armed conflicts,« says Kelland Stevenson.

The new agreement means that International Save the Children and other NGOs will be given access to military recruitment and training centres. International Save the Children will also work with support and rehabilitation of child soldiers when they come home.

»The big challenge now for the government is to actually implement the plan,« says Kelland Stevenson. »The work

requires both that systems are developed for monitoring and reporting, and that recruiters' behaviour and mentality change drastically. There are many indications that the positive development this agreement embodies will take time.«

Kyaw and Win still see known child soldier recruiters operating in their area. In a new report, the Child Soldiers International organisation has also shown that recruitment is still ongoing, despite all the promises. There is still no system for age verification. And the armed ethnic rebel groups have not signed any agreements.

**K**yaw and Win are both actively involved in the local youth group where they had the opportunity to learn about children's rights and to share their experiences with each other and with other young people in the area.

»The most important thing I have

learned in the group is how to mobilise people,« said Kyaw. »The more people who share knowledge, the greater the opportunity to get more protection. I hope that my experiences contribute to no more children being tricked. And that adults understand that they do not have to send children to the front.«

Both he and Kyaw still find it hard to sleep. Aung too.

»I'm afraid that someone from the army will come and take me again,« he says. Win agrees.

»My memories haunt me. They keep me awake at night. I remember looking through the fence at the children playing outside and thinking that I wanted to be out there playing with them!«

What would you do if you met the people who held you captive today?

»I often thought when I was a prisoner that I wanted revenge, but I could not get it then, I was too small and too weak,« says Kyaw.

»If I met them now, I would like hit them with a fist in the face, like they did with me. Then I would say, Don't ever do this again! Not to any child!«

# 14

## QUESTIONS FOR KELLAND STEVENSON

Kelland Stevenson is Country Director and responsible for International Save the Children's operations in Burma. He gets upset when he thinks about the abuse the children in the country are exposed to.

At the same time he describes developments currently underway as extraordinary.

»People see new hope for the future.«

TEXT SOPHIE ARNÖ PHOTO PAUL HANSEN

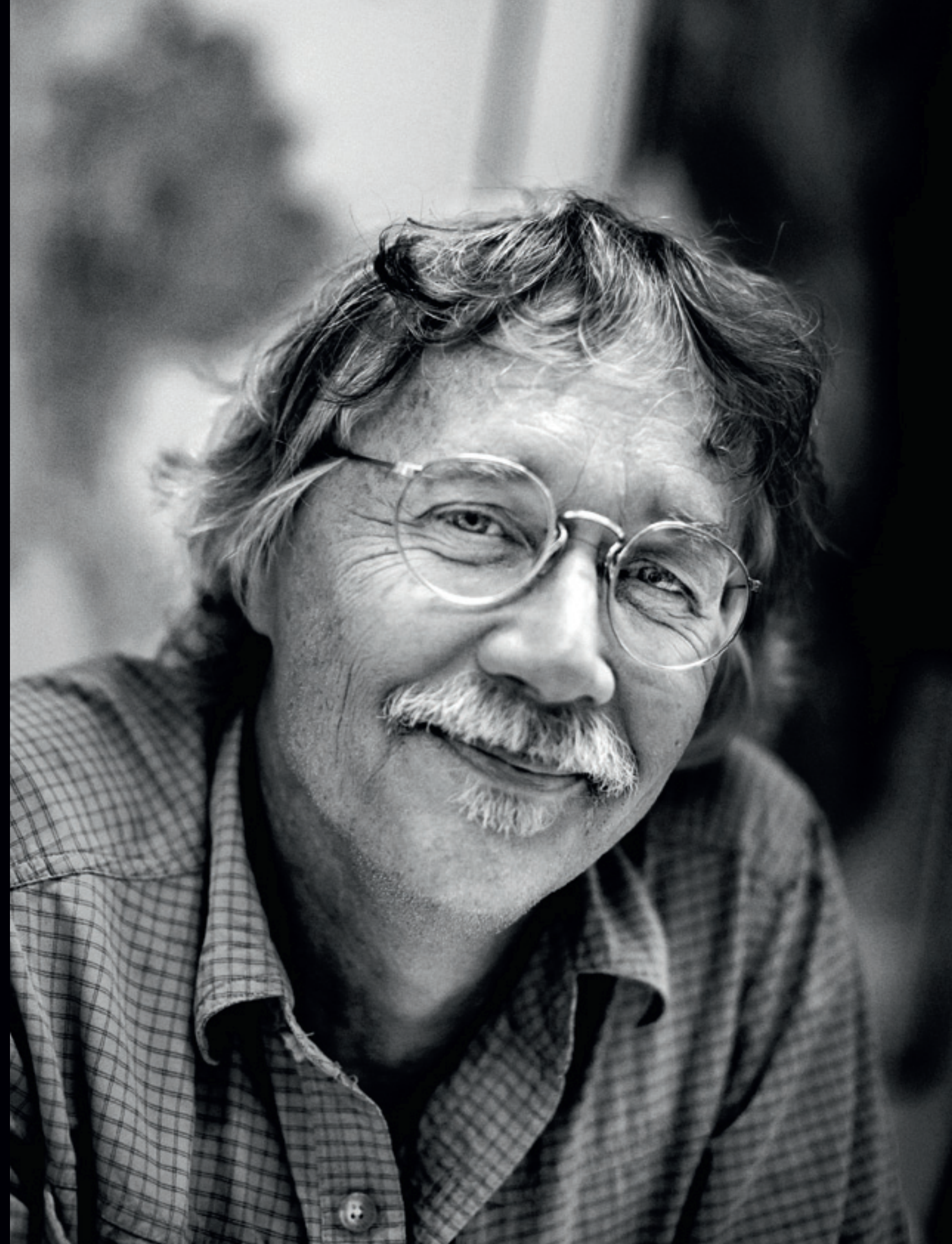
**1** *How do you regard the economic and political transformation taking place in Burma right now?*

Everything is moving so fast! At first, people were unsure whether the initiatives for change were meant seriously. But it seems that they are. There is a genuine desire to reform the country and the way it is governed. Already, censorship has decreased and political prisoners have been released. There is a greater understanding of children's rights and widespread support for democratic principles. But of course there are

still many questions to be asked. Especially about how they will interact with the country's ethnic minorities. There has been unrest in parts of the country for the last 50 years so things will take time to heal.

**2** *What influence do the military have today?*

About 25% of MPs have a military background. People from the military also have a clear presence in the more junior positions in government around the country. It will take time before their influence decreases. ➔



**3** *How can the International Save the Children influence these changes?*

The more we can lift the children's voices to the decision-makers, the greater the influence we will have. Children often take up things that adults don't think about. They also tend to be forward thinking in a different way, more optimistic. Their experiences and thoughts are needed now when we have to consider such things as how to demolish walls that have been built up between different groups. How can we, for example, get children of Muslims and Buddhists to go to school together? We are also working to build the capacity of local groups and conducting advocacy work concerning different authorities.

**4** *Can the children themselves play any role in this process?*

Absolutely! We work together with the Ministry of Social Affairs to promote children's participation. Recently we had a meeting where representatives of the military were present. Before that the children presented an investigation of their own into the problems young people encounter out in the districts. We also let the children evaluate our work. Once a year we gather a group of different ages and ask how satisfied they are. Are we focusing on the right things? Is there anything we can do better?

**5** *Do you see any changes in the government's willingness to prioritise children's issues?*

There is a realisation that much more needs to be invested in health care. The Government is currently reviewing the entire education system to explore how it can be improved. They also signed a Joint Action Plan to stop the recruitment of child soldiers for the government army. Several new laws are in place, but implementation is not always as consistent as it should be.

**6** *What issues are the focus of International Save the Children operations in the country?*

Health, education and child protection. Health and education have been greatly under-funded by the Government for many years. It is common for children not to go to school and the quality of teaching is low. Many under fives still die from diseases that are treatable, such as pneumonia, malaria and diarrhoea. There are not enough trained staff in the field.

Many children are also subjected to violence and abuse in school, at home and by their employers. Trafficking of children and young people is also common. They are often attracted to the army. Those who migrate to Thailand or China in search of work often do it illegally making them extra vulnerable.

**7** *How do you work to meet the needs of children?*

We work primarily to increase knowledge about the children's situation and rights at local, regional and national levels. Out in the villages we are helping to start local groups. When people learn more, for example about child trafficking, this also increases their ability to protect themselves. We have received a lot of support from the government for this work because they see the benefit of it and they want us to develop it across the country.

**8** *It has been profitable to recruit children to the army – do you think the business will cease now?*

We hear that recruitment is still going on in some quarters. One important result of the Joint Action Plan is that we have gained access to military recruitment and training centres. I believe that increased transparency is important. However it is probable that this activity will continue to some extent. There are also the children in the guerrilla groups. They have not signed any joint action plans.

**9** *How do you feel about the use of children in this way?*

It makes me angry and upset. The fact that this is happening, the use of children and subjecting them to cruel abuse – not just physically but they are also traumatised by being involved in activities where they don't know if they'll survive. This goes on day after day, week after week, month after month. We have met many child soldiers who have been horrifically abused.

**10** *Will the perpetrators be prosecuted?*

I'm not sure. Perhaps the children can join together and take them to court. We don't know yet because we have not yet got that far. So far, only about forty out of several thousand children have been released from the army.

**11** *What has touched you most when you have travelled around the country?*

It's amazing to see how people work to improve their lives, even in poor areas. Take, for example, child rights groups we have acted as a catalyst for, people really take in the message and use the opportunities they get. It's such a different time here. People have new opportunities and it has given them new hope for the future.

»The more we can lift the children's voices to decision-makers, the greater the influence we will have.«

**12** *What risks do you see in terms of the country's development future?*

There is an eagerness among both the authorities and the people, which is positive. But it also brings risks. The country has opened its doors to everyone. It is rich in resources such as natural gas and oil; and there are many who want to invest. Nothing is regulated. Some want it 'to be like Thailand' as quickly as possible, others warn against rapid growth.

**13** *How can economic growth be distributed so that it benefits the people?*

That's a good question. When I lived in Bangladesh, I saw that what was most important was that they develop roads, electricity and communication systems, since they connect countryside to city – where economic opportunities are available. Today there are many remote areas that it is not even possible to get to, especially during the rainy season.

**14** *What do you see as the greatest challenge going forward?*

Myanmar is, in many ways, similar to the former Yugoslavia. It consists of a collection of ethnic groups who were forced together into a country. If these groups do not feel fairly represented, if they feel they do not have a voice, we may see continued social unrest in some of its regions, such as Kachin and Rakhine. The biggest challenge for the current government is to answer the question: How do we get diverse groups of people to live peacefully together as a nation?