

Human Trafficking:

a cameraman's journal

○ NORTH KOREA

CHINA ○

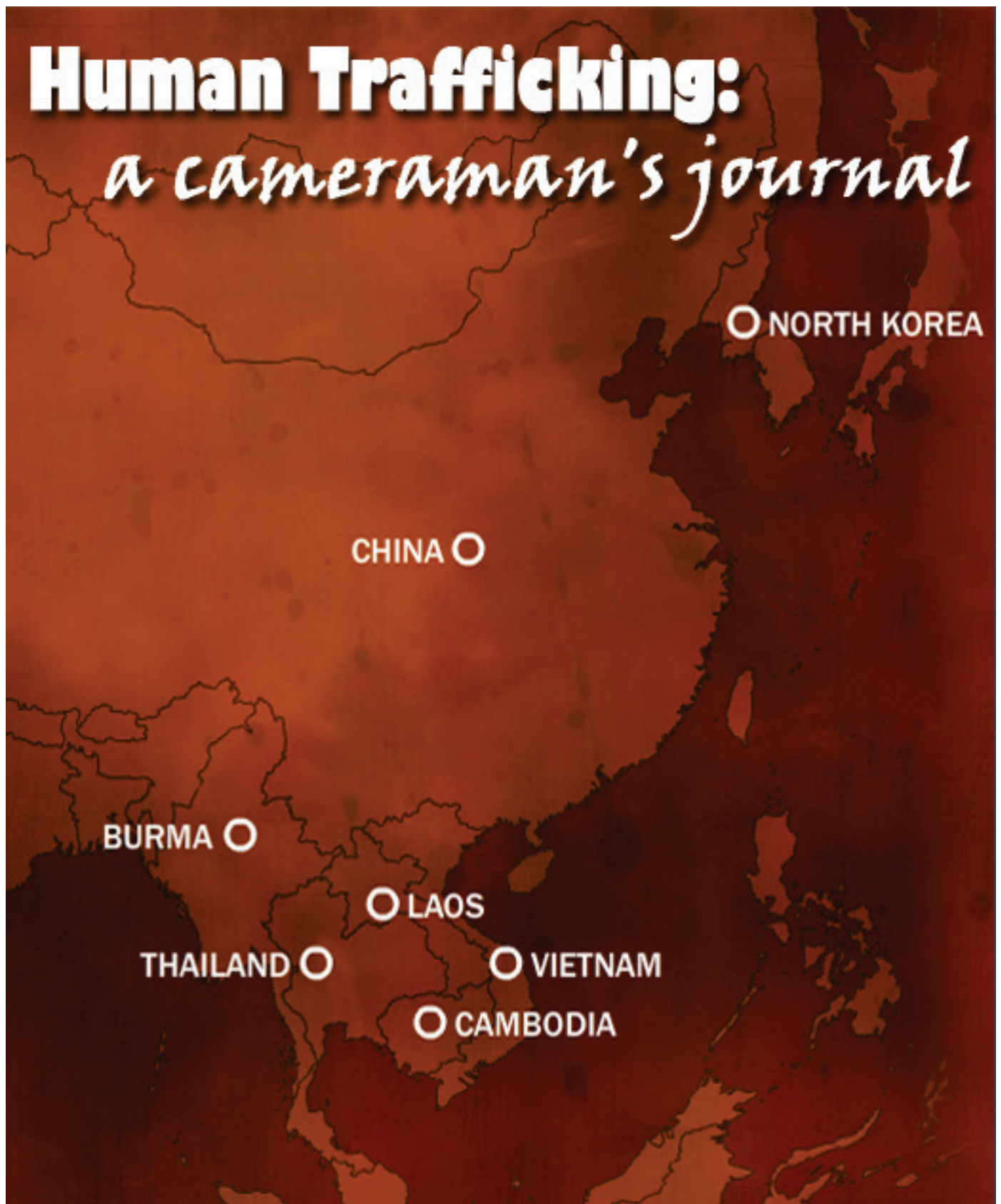
BURMA ○

○ LAOS

THAILAND ○

○ VIETNAM

○ CAMBODIA



Foreword

At the dawn of the 21st century, men and women still lure, trap, and exploit other human beings.

According to the United Nations, an estimated 24 million people are enslaved in Asia alone.

In 2011, a team of reporters traveled to faraway places in Asia to expose the true face of slavery today.

The outcome of this voyage was a seven-video series published on the Radio Free Asia website, and a half-hour TV documentary distributed on satellite television.

The pages you are about to read are the private observations of the lead cameraman, whose name we cannot reveal.

He is a well-traveled and experienced professional. Yet what he saw during this assignment “changed him forever.”

He and his colleagues spoke to a child who had to kill to free himself, to women sold as “wives,” to parents who lost everything to search for their kidnapped sons, and to many others.

Amidst the horrors of these victims’ daily lives, one insuppressible human drive defines them all—the desire to be free.

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Thailand: from Bangkok to Mae Sot

The journey from Bangkok to Mae Sot was an alarming six-hour blur of unpredictable traffic conditions where road rules and speed limits, both slow and fast, were unanimously ignored. The road was shared by every kind of vehicle used in Asia over the past 1,000 years, ranging from hand-made bullock carts to iridescent sport cars rocketing past like brightly lit kamikaze pilots.

As Mae Sot drew near, the landscape of Thailand's central floodplains was uplifted by the Tenasserim Hills, and the road began to rise following the topography of the sheer mountains and valleys. Forests overhung the way, and roadside stalls displayed hardwood carvings of life-sized tigers, miniature elephants, and monumental dinner tables.



Thailand's Tak province, in which the border town of Mae Sot is located, is a center for illicit markets in gems, drugs, luxury timber such as teak, endangered animals, and trafficked people. The mountainous western side of Thailand holds the remnants of a once-vast continental forest. Here Asian elephants, tigers, and other rare species cling to existence.

The jungles, with green shadows and looming chasms, have an atmosphere of mystery and possibility, enhanced by the knowledge that we were climbing the walls of the historical barrier between the ancient states of Siam and Burma.

Five hundred years ago, these dramatic peaks were the pathways of great armies invading on the backs of war elephants. Even now this border remains a dangerous place, a grey space where different ethnic armies hold out against Burma's government.

Arriving in Mae Sot, the first thing that struck me was how much like the rest of Thailand it looked: the same ramshackle kind of urban spread, with narrow village roads slowly consumed by layers of unregulated development.

Then again, as one of only two official border crossings between Thailand and Burma, nothing is really normal in this fast-growing border town.

Somewhere upward of 200,000 Burmese refugees live in Mae Sot, displaced by their nation's 60-year-long civil war. We were a bit on edge, having a new kind of challenge ahead: reporting on human trafficking from within Burma itself and from the refugee camps on its borders.

The need for secrecy and discretion about our task had been clearly communicated by everyone from Washington D.C. to Bangkok. Arriving in Mae Sot, we were all too aware that our work would fall in the shadows between Burmese war and Thai corruption.

Burma: children of war

Good luck and strange coincidences were at work as we prepared for the assignment, with Karen contacts in faraway London providing access to the Karen National Union government. It was with their guidance that we intended to pursue the first story of child soldiers across the border into the jungles of Burma.

But first, RFA's Thai Bureau chief Pimuk arranged a contact with his own networks. So on the first afternoon after we arrived in Mae Sot, we met with a 19-year-old boy who had escaped from the Burmese government's armed forces. He had been forcibly conscripted as a child of 15.

We met the boy at a local NGO run by refugees for refugees. Life inside Burma is obviously hard, but the difficulties facing refugees do not stop once they cross the border. The boy, who goes by the name of Moe to conceal his real identity, was small but hardened by work. He told us that he was working as a laborer in Mae Sot, one among the hundreds of thousands of immigrants employed on construction sites across Thailand and throughout the region.

They can be seen in skyscrapers and shoddy apartment sites, building this century's megacities using bamboo scaffolding.



Moe was dressed in a sarong, his hair cropped short. The first thing that stood out about him was his jitteriness. His eyes darted nervously, and his movements were delicate and restless. His gentle but manic agility expressed itself further in his speech, which was slightly impaired, as if getting stuck on the shape and the meaning of his words.

We sat down to interview him, and he revealed a story of Burmese military recruitment that involved kidnapping children, forcing them into the army on threat of death or imprisonment, and then a brutal training program during which many younger and weaker children died.

After training camp, Moe was sent into active combat while still only a boy of perhaps 16 or 17. He was given command over his fellow recruits because he was the oldest of them all. It was then that he plotted with his best friend to murder his commanding officer and escape.

Remembering a killing

Listening to this slight young man speaking in broken sentences explain how they went to the toilet in the jungle with their commanding officer, and killed him there, we were all struck by the plainness of his admission.

With a slicing hand gesture and a glance at the ground in the direction a body would fall, Moe did not change his expression as he recalled the killing.

His flight to Thailand took him through jungles. Hunted, battling malaria, and starving, he and his best friend made it to Thailand but not to safety. Sometime after the two arrived, Moe told us, Burmese agents found his friend. They killed him and cut his eyes out. The Burmese armed forces want no witnesses to how it treats these children.

At the end of our interview, Moe said he just wanted to see his mother again. Then he added that he wanted to know how this could have happened to him and to many children like him.

Watching Moe ride away, a colleague commented that Moe was, in his opinion, capable of great violence, that you could see it in his face. I agreed, but then I also saw a boy with a stammer, whose body seemed gripped by nervousness, never able to rest, like a terrified animal, and who wanted more than anything else to see his mother.

He was a victim of unimaginable child abuse by the armed forces of his own government. Even in Thailand he is still not safe, is still hunted, and is afraid of ending up like his best friend—murdered and found in a vacant lot.

Rain in the jungle

Returning to our hotel, we digested Moe's story while packing for a journey across the border into Burma to find out more about human trafficking and child soldiers.

The mountains of Burma's eastern Karen state are very close to Mae Sot, and by the next night we would be somewhere in those mountains with the Karen resistance.

We would be picked up by our Karen contacts at 5 a.m. The rain fell hard and loudly all night. I didn't sleep much, imagining the rain falling in the thick jungle just a few kilometers and fewer hours away.

Eventually I fell asleep. About three minutes later the alarm went off.

In childlike disbelief at the injustice of my situation, I shuffled through my dark hotel room gathering my body, thoughts, and backpacks.

Outside, the predawn morning was warm, but the rain was still falling. It looked like this would be a wet adventure.



Downstairs, after we had a breakfast of super-processed tiny sausages and eggs, a shiny pickup truck arrived, and our Karen contacts helped us stow our luggage in the luggage rack, using tarpaulins and ropes to make it as waterproof as possible.

After a few stops around town to pick up other people sharing our journey, we were on the road toward a crossing into Burma's eastern highlands that must remain a secret.

The skies cleared and the heat grew.

As we stepped into Burma, our bodies struggled to acclimatize. Our clothes and hair were drenched with sweat. The tropical forests growing on steep, slippery mountains were as thick as any we had seen in Asia.

In Karen territory

Our guides pointed to one high hilltop, perhaps a kilometer away from us, where the closest Burmese army base watched over traffic moving in the open. But for the most part this landscape of sheer mountains and rocky valleys was under the control of the Karen National Union and its Liberation Army.

Our location and details of our movements with the Karen are sensitive, but without revealing too much, I can say that we discovered a whole world of pain and exhaustion in those jagged hills. One day, we walked from dawn until dark, and not one step was on level ground. In the humid, baking heat, we walked 13 hours up crumbling steep paths and down muddy ones, up sheer zigzagging tracks and down slippery red clay creek beds.

Then, late in the afternoon when even our blisters had blisters and our sense of humor was turning black, the rain started to fall and soon became a torrential downpour. We tried to negotiate our way down a long mountain ridge as the path filled with water and became a series of waterfalls and rapids.



American hands fighting in Vietnam 40 years ago might have held this old M16. Now it serves a Karen soldier as one of a random collection of weapons from all the conflicts of the 20th century that have been sold or stolen into the jungles of Burma.

For the next couple of hours, every 10 steps were punctuated by a bone-jarring fall. Finally in the darkness, we stepped over a bamboo fence and entered a quiet village right in the heart of Karen State.

Happy old saints

That night, after a bucket shower that felt more like a religious experience, we consumed a simple but delicious rice, greens, and chicken dinner under direct instructions from our famished cells. We followed this with some rice spirit (think biofuel), zipped ourselves up in our mosquito nets, and fell asleep the way that happy old saints deserve to die.

But the next day, we were still not finished walking. By the time we were done, my feet were wrapped in a roll of green gaffa tape to prevent a further layer of skin from blistering and being slowly torn off by each excruciating footfall.

The lesson of this walk—like so many lessons in the real world where electricity, freeways, and antibiotics do not shield people from harsh reality—was that I would be in trouble if we needed to run from the Burmese army.

In just a few hours, my body would not heed my need to keep running.



A path in the jungle in Eastern Burma.

But it is into just these mountains that the Karen and other minority people must run to hide from the Burmese army as it cleanses contested lands. This is a process that has been going on for decades and still continues.

We walked to a river where a longtail boat took us to an Internally Displaced Persons Camp. We were then dropped off a few hundred meters before the camp to avoid the eyes of Thai soldiers stationed on the opposite bank.

Insert: boat - Caption: Any boat plying the waters of the Moei River between Thailand and Burma needs to have a variety of flags. Flying the correct one will depend on which armed force might be watching from either bank. Checkpoints and military posts will stop boats and have been known to fire on craft that fail to stop on command.

The riverbank was a beach of sand deposited by the flooding surges of this violent river and surrounded on all sides by sheer, eroded mountains carved with deep storm falls and landslides. The jungles were thick and brilliant green.

The heat was stifling as we climbed to the ridge of the lowest hills, and our clothes were soon saturated with sweat flowing from every pore.

Waiting to live again

Three men from the camp met and guided us slightly off the path to where the camp's security post and watchtower was located.

It consisted of a small, elevated hut, constructed in the local style with raised living platforms either side of a lower passageway, and with all sides and floors given plenty of gaps for any breeze that might pass by.

We were given mugs of plain hot tea, strangely cooling, and talked with these unarmed refugees who are tasked with looking out for any signs of the Burmese army.

Like all refugees, their main work consisted of waiting to go home or of finding refuge in a third country so they could start living again.



Mae La refugee camp on the Thai/Burma border.

They were happy to see outsiders, and after a while they led us back out onto the path. A few hundred meters later we emerged from fresh-cut secondary brush and encountered a group of huts, the start of the camp itself.

All the dwellings and buildings were constructed from bamboo and wood harvested from the forest. These camps are not homes or permanent communities.

Every hut had a small garden, although very few chickens and even fewer pigs could be seen. Usually the first creatures to greet a visitor at a village's outskirts, they forage far and wide for scraps and rubbish.

Houses built of bamboo and rattan and perched on stilts on the perilous hillsides sprawled out as far as we could see on the Burmese side of the river.

Our appearance, as large Western visitors with movie cameras and an escort, sent groups of children into paroxysms of excited curiosity. We paused several times to talk with mothers carrying infants on their backs and resting in the thin shadows cast by the huts to protect themselves from the intense heat of the midday sun.

One woman told us just how critical their situation had become as international political trends shift away from support for refugees fleeing the Burmese army. She explained how a recent reduction in aid to the camps had cut their daily rice quota.

Even worse, the aid shipment was once again late by a few days. She told us that if she rationed her own food she would have just enough to feed her children for two days, and then nothing.

Limbo and violence

People in these camps are trapped in limbo, forced from their villages by the Tatmadaw, the Burmese government forces, and yet prohibited by Thailand's government from crossing the river.

They are unable to develop the land around them without attracting the violent interest of the Tatmadaw, which attacks the camps to prevent the refugees from establishing a permanent footing.

Only the Thai Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), a collaboration of aid organizations, provides food and limited medical supplies.

Since Burma's nominally democratic elections, however, the international community has started to court the Burmese government as a profitable investment opportunity.

The politics of this situation have a direct consequence on the camps, with major supporters of the TBBC, along with Denmark and Norway, cutting funding to pursue development opportunities in partnership with the Burmese government.

The main agent of this policy is the European Union, with Germany leading the charge. But for the camps, the elections were followed by an increase in the savagery of the Tatmadaw, with around 10,000 newly displaced persons fleeing the fighting into the jungles to make it to the temporary safety of similar camps near the border of Thailand.



Jungle food is highly valued and can attract high prices. For opposition forces fighting from the jungles, being able to find and catch lizards like this is one of the indigenous skills that help them survive and continue their struggle against the government.

Just before stepping off the ridgeline, we gained a vantage point from which the scale of the camp was revealed—a carpet of thousands of thatched roofs covering the sheer mountainsides for a kilometer.

The steepest sections of the hills where the camp was built occasionally forced us onto the seat of our pants. Our stumbles were at least greatly entertaining for the people in their homes.

We stopped to say hello at one house where a group of people were helping to rethatch the roof with woven rattan panels. An old man and his wife, terribly emaciated, greeted us with a warmth that belied their desperate situation. Later, one of our Karen colleagues noted that he had seen his own mother in just such a state only days before she passed away in another refugee camp a few years before.

The old man told us about his escape from the Tatmadaw. When they fled the soldiers, they took their five children with them, but the next few weeks of rain, hunger, heat, malaria, dysentery, and starvation claimed the lives of four of them.

Powerlessness

One has to spend time in a tropical jungle to know how lethal it can be, how unimaginable it would be to have to run into it with your children and hide there, hungry, weak, and without shelter.

As we listened to the old man's story, he smiled at the worst parts, at his powerlessness, and at the impossibility of reason in such a cruel world.

Driven from their homes by landmines, bullets, and systematic rape, this man's children died fleeing for their lives, and were just as surely murdered by the Burmese army as if they had been shot by a soldier.

As we spoke with him, our colleagues received word of more recently arrived refugees from the ongoing attacks of the Burmese army. We said goodbye to the old man, who smiled and waved to us, standing beside his frail wife under their newly thatched roof.

Walking through the unplanned lanes between the lives of the thousands of people waiting for life to resume, it was impossible not to grasp that Burma's civil war echoes far beyond its borders.

The human consequences of Burma's ethnic cleansing include the tens of thousands of people lost in jungles, or sold as slaves to fuel human trafficking in many industries throughout Asia and beyond. They live behind barbed wire in Malaysian internment camps. They set out on rickety boats to seek a home across the seas.

We walked for another half an hour up and down the hills and through the camp. We walked past bamboo school buildings and medical centers and across a field where young men played chinlor, foot volleyball, until we reached another house.

In a small living area and kitchen perched high on stilts, we met the recent arrivals, a young family just emerged from the jungle, with the mother breast-feeding a newborn baby.

Interrupted lives

The temporary town of split bamboo clung to the valley wall. The Thai army post waved its flag across the river.

In the camp, people shared a similar loss. Whoever they had been, and some of the people they had known, had been left behind somewhere in the run through the jungle. Plans for the future, for their children's future, had been abandoned along with paddies tended by hand, stored rice, chickens, pigs, and school books—a life. Here, they all faced east toward Thailand's closed border.

A week later, we visited a different camp built on the Thai side of the border: Mae La, a wooden metropolis and the largest refugee camp on the border. One hundred fifty thousand people live in Mae La, unable to leave, to work, to farm, or to build permanent houses. The camp is 25 years old.

The area with its river towns and mountain villages is a tourist center for Thailand. From the road, Mae La looks like a cultural wonder, its neat rattan and bamboo neighbourhoods hugging the dramatic mountains and green ravines.

But the people living here are interned by a Thai government policy that denies them the basic freedoms necessary to make a life. This includes the right to speak to visiting journalists. As a result, we had to sneak in and out of the camp, while a constant flow of traffic demonstrated the informal arrangements made between police and refugees that fuel an illicit economy.



Police check papers and take bribes at a checkpoint outside Mae La camp.

The main gate at the Mae La camp has a handful of shops. In one shop run by a local organisation, we hid ourselves from the Thai police to interview a few people about their experiences trying to make a life in Mae La. We also set up a camera, only to be regularly and rapidly ushered behind the counter to hide every time a policeman came by.

The interviewees were all young, and all of them spoke about the complete lack of opportunity that drives them to risk their lives, illegally leaving the camp to seek work in Thailand. They told us this was a business run by the police, with every road and path controlled and payments required.

The people we spoke to had experienced exploitation, imprisonment, and in some cases slavery. One man spoke of being sold by the police to a fishing boat, where he saw a man too tired to work murdered and thrown overboard.

Another told of the women who disappear into the houses of Thai families, hired as housekeepers and never seen again.

One man's sister went out to find work several years ago, and has not been heard from since.

Another man had twice been exploited, first at a petrol station where his wages were withheld

and from which he had to escape, and then in a factory he was imprisoned, with all of his wages reclaimed as costs by his employer.

All of them confirmed being illegally transported by the police, and housed at police stations and homes used as holding stations before being sold to their various “owners.”

After returning to Mae Sot, we saw a constant stream of people being stopped at roadblocks. The police were checking their IDs and, according to all reports, demanding on-the-spot fines.

On the back of a motorcycle

On our final day in Mae Sot, a Burmese friend of a friend took me for a ride on the back of his motorcycle. He had the same false papers that many cross-border residents use to make a life in Thailand, and we spent a nervous day taking pictures around Mae Sot, hoping not to attract police attention.

Everywhere we went, we saw two or more policemen conducting random identity checks. Near the closed Friendship Bridge, police at a roadblock were hard at work. The meaning of this apparently normal police activity became clear when we drove to the river that flows between Thailand and Burma, a narrow piece of dirty water with a motley collection of low-rise buildings on either side.

There, an entrepreneur with a huge inner tube was ferrying people back and forth across the swift stream, with five or more at a time sitting on the tube and trying to keep their dresses and pants dry.

Meanwhile, police on both sides looked on, like guards do all over the world, chewing gum, exchanging cigarettes, and gazing disinterestedly around. Just down the road another police contingent was hard at work skimming its percentage off the daily traffic.

Between the mountains and the plains, hundreds of thousands of Burma's displaced people live, trapped in this vise, being squeezed on one side by their own government ethnically cleansing them from their lands, and on the other side by Thailand, a hub for the international slave trade.

On to South Korea

The first moment I landed in Seoul, I knew that I liked South Korea. It was something about the bold elegance of the landscape and its buildings, and then there was the old Bible salesman who rode with me on the bus from the airport.

I started the conversation with a simple question about whether our bus was the right one, but from there the conversation quickly became a free lesson in South Korean history, and proof of the direct warmth of these people.

The man was perhaps in his late 60's but sharp as a tack. He told me how after the Second World War everyone was starving, and then the North Koreans invaded, all the way to the sea, until only the small area around the port of Pusan remained unoccupied.

After the ceasefire in 1954, South Korea returned to misery and starvation. By this time in the man's story, our bus was crossing one of many bridges over the wide Han River, and the blazing wonder of Seoul's economic power was shining in every neon color in the night.

Seoul in 1960 was still a humid, rain-soaked mudflat, with people living in poverty, and corruption running rampant.



A view of Seoul, South Korea's capital, August 2011. High-rises stretch as far as the eye can see.

My new tutor's own story now jumped ahead to join the flow of contemporary history and international conflict as he moved to Vietnam to become a Bible salesman. His travels from then on never ceased, and he spent time in America, Australia, Japan, and elsewhere, selling things.

Meanwhile, back in South Korea a military coup, emergency powers, economic growth, the subsequent assassination of a dictator, and finally a kind of raw democracy seemed to have worked, because the country I had landed in was clearly doing well.

Escape from the North

We had come to meet women who had made the perilous journey from North Korea. They had been tricked along the way and sold as wives to Chinese village men.

Our contact was a Korean-American businessman-turned-evangelist who had previously been imprisoned in China for rescuing North Korean women enslaved there as wives and sex workers.

The close relationship between the communist governments of China and North Korea means that even those people who cross into China just to escape starvation are considered defectors and are forcibly repatriated.

Inside North Korea, these people are treated as traitors and face unspeakable punishment.

Our contact had returned to continue his work despite the risks, and he took us to meet one of the women he had been able to save.

She lived in a high-rise apartment block, one of many such blocks in a large vertical neighbourhood and one of hundreds of similar neighbourhoods around Seoul.

In her tiny flat, the woman was readying her young son for Taekwondo practice. Her older son was out.

The two boys had been born apart, one in North Korea and the other in the South. The woman told us about starvation and about how many people had died in the North in the 90s and after.



Then, she had heard about life being better in China, that you could “eat your fill.” It was the compelling power of those words and her need to feed her child that drove her across the border.

But as soon as she got to China she was sold, bought by a farmer somewhere in a village where the one-child policy had resulted in a shortage of females. There are many more men than women in China today.

Eventually she was arrested by the Chinese, sent back to North Korea, imprisoned, and tortured in a labor camp.

And then somehow she crossed again into China. This time, with the help of our contact, she traveled safely to South Korea.

She wept as she spoke about her family back in the North. She said her mother had no idea there was a place where food could be so abundant, and no idea about freedom. In truth, her journey seemed not just about achieving freedom and escaping terror, but about losing the very things you need to make your life meaningful—your family and yourself.

Chains in their minds

The next day, we met and interviewed two more women who had been sold as wives to Chinese men. Both eventually were arrested and sent back to labor camps in North Korea. There, they were forced to work every day for years and lived in a cell with 20 or more other women, sharing one toilet bucket.

Women who arrived in the labor camp pregnant were forced to abort their babies as “traitors” to the state. One woman told us how the soldiers jumped on the belly of a pregnant woman.

The horrors of this out-of-control state reminded us of stories of Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge, and

also of the extremes of China's Cultural Revolution. It seems there is a pattern to the cruelty inspired by totalitarian power put into the hands of ordinary people.

These women spoke about how they now lived only for their children in South Korea, putting out of their mind the children they left behind in their escape from China or the children who had died in a desperate famine the year they left North Korea.

Even in South Korea they continue to live in fear. They don't go out for fear of North Korean spies. They can't eat without thinking of the hunger of their families in the North. They feel alienated by the wealth and exuberance of the South. It seems somehow improper and crass.

Even in Seoul they are still not free. Their chains have been forged in their minds.

On our final day in South Korea we took a trip to the DMZ.



Looking at North Korea from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), August 2011.

Standing there and looking out over the empty land where they say wild animals are now proliferating in the void left between the two warring states, it seemed strange to see how close North Korea is.

Yet the women we had met had been forced to take a longer, more dangerous and damaging journey through China and slavery, though the North is just over that line.

So close, and yet never again can they hope to step back into the arms of the families they have left behind.

China's black factories

Sometimes you learn more about a place by what you can't know than by what is easy to find out. After a prolonged effort to find stories of human trafficking inside China, all we knew was that no one wanted to talk to us.

It was clear that since the Olympic Games, the Chinese government has been hard at work cracking down on anyone who thought the arrival of the games of peace might have signaled a new openness.

Arriving in Hong Kong, we set about nearly a fortnight of 18-hour days, scouring news reports, calling journalists, government officials, orphanages, and police stations, and tracking down individuals who have spoken on the issue.

After a while, as each door closed and every lead went cold, it appeared that the civil society which articulates the stories of the invisible and oppressed in other Asian nations barely exists inside China.

Then, in the last days before we traveled to mainland China, we learned of a group of parents living in Henan whose sons were among thousands of young men who have been kidnapped and enslaved in the region's many brick factories and coal mines.



Mr. Miao shows a photo of his son, who disappeared in 2004 and has never been found.

Arriving in the province that is the oldest cradle of Chinese civilization, we found that the capital city Zhengzhou is a ruin of industry and shabby development, with pollution from its industries thick in the air.

The old city with low-rise buildings is being buried by a wave of high-rise developments, built seemingly without concern for who might actually live in them.

We met one of the parents, Mr. Miao, on the corner of a vast intersection and walked to his house beneath the looming presence of more of these super-apartments.

Miao struck me immediately with his gentle sad face, with a long slightly hooked nose. He had none of the brash aggressiveness of his neighbours, who, as we walked through the busy little streets together, were noisily selling food and goods.

Up a single flight of dark, cold concrete stairs, and through a metal door, Miao's home was a single room filled with bric-à-brac, castoffs, and rejects—all things collected from the street.

Sitting on his bed, he told us the story of his son while we hovered in a narrow canyon made from pamphlets and magazines, the only space left aside from a small crouching place for the clay fire where his wife made their food.

Miao showed us the photos of more than 100 young men who had disappeared like his son. He knew many parents from across Henan who had lost their sons.



They were all numbered

They did not know each other's names; they had only numbers.

Considering the few men and boys who had escaped, it was clear that a system of kidnapping men from train stations and public places, and then selling them to brick factories and coal mines, is widespread in the province.

The conditions in the factories were appalling, with many having seen men beaten to death.

In one photo, Miao showed me a group of perhaps 15 men of all ages standing outside a police station. They had been rescued from a factory. Their clothes were tattered, and their bodies were limp from hunger and maltreatment.

Miao pointed out the form of a young boy slumped on the ground who had had both his legs broken. Miao didn't think the boy would have survived.

Miao said that he was a veteran from a secret Chinese army that had fought against American forces in Vietnam. More recently, corrupt local officials had stolen his farmland. It was while he was away petitioning for compensation that his son disappeared.

Without his land, and with no income and no son, his future is extremely insecure. Sitting in his tiny cluttered room and surrounded by the useless items he has collected to try to resell, Miao shuffled the papers and photos that were the only evidence that his son had ever existed.

The birth of a son has special significance in China. Daughters will join their husband's family, and all the love and money a parent invests in a girl is, as one woman explained to us, like "water down the drain."

This leaves only a son to provide for his parents' retirement.

The following day, we met three more parents waiting with Miao at the intersection, and together we climbed aboard a shoebox of a van with conveniently tinted windows.

We drove out of town just 20 or 30 minutes to an area with many factories, where news reporters had recently found some workers imprisoned in a brick business.

We saw dozens of factories with high walls and guard dogs. Then we took the parents to the local police station.

The police offered no new information. The workers in the news report had disappeared again.

I began to comprehend the maddening logic that drove these parents—of looking and not knowing whether their son was behind that wall or that gate, around that corner, or dead.

The baby sellers

We left Henan with a deeper sense of what drives China's economic miracle. Hundreds of millions of previously agrarian villagers have either flocked to the cities to seek higher wages or have been displaced by corrupt development.

They are the largest workforce in history, with no rights and no real unions, and are unable to protest for fear of being brutally silenced by the state.

As the world turns to China's economy to maintain its balance sheets, the truth is that the exploitation of hundreds of millions of people has propped up this creation of global wealth.

We also discovered that China has another kind of marketplace, where human lives are for sale—a trade that reaches right into the homes of families in Europe and North America.

The next story we will tell concerns the adoption of Chinese children by families overseas, and points to widespread evidence of the kidnapping and trafficking of children by orphanages throughout China.

A contact told us about a "baby market" for rich Chinese parents who fill the gap left by nature by buying babies from a well-established source just north of Hong Kong. The babies sold here are only the most healthy and beautiful. This is meant to satisfy the clients' budget and pride.

We travel to Guangdong, just near Hong Kong, and then to Shenzhen, famous as the center of many of the world's largest factories, including an immense and impenetrable installation where several hundred thousand people are employed to make technology, including iPhones.

In a beautiful park filled with families enjoying the lake and sunshine, we meet a man who trafficked children for a decade before being arrested and sentenced to three years in jail.

We were quite nervous, and knew that it was important to gain his trust before trying to get his story. So we spent several hours eating and chatting about the scenery and his new job as a driver for the iPhones factory.

Once he was comfortable with us, he agreed to do an on-camera interview to give his side of the story—a story that we soon realized cast him as good Samaritan wronged by the national Chinese Children's Adoption Agency and by the orphanages, all of which he had worked with for many years before being imprisoned.

Family business

The business he worked in was a family concern overseen by his mother, who had the contacts with orphanages, while he, his sisters, and his wife “found” the babies.

For eight years, orphanages all over central China had paid this family for finding and delivering to them more than 300 children.

Where these babies finally ended up is nearly impossible to know, as they had no identity and would have had a new one created for them by their orphanage.

The real number of children they “found” for the orphanages is also impossible to know.

The man claimed that the babies were found left in boxes, on street corners, or on doorsteps, a consequence of China’s one-child policy and families’ desire to have a boy.

It seemed hard to believe that so many babies, most of them girls, could just have been found in a box on a city street.



They are usually found in crowded places, abandoned with a box of diapers or toys.

But in recent years, reports across the country have pointed to kidnappings from the street, and even by local officials enforcing the one-child policy.

Either way, the children’s origins become impossible to know once they fall into the hands of a finder or an orphanage.

The orphanages’ demand for babies was constant, the former trafficker told us, and was driven by the large sums of money they and the Chinese Children’s Adoption Agency could make from every Western placement in fees and licenses, travel costs, tours, and photos.

But his own lucrative trade in babies stopped one day when a traveler on a train reported the man and his wife to police when one of the four babies they were carrying in boxes fell out onto the floor.

This led to a court case and prison sentences for himself and his sisters, while his mother was allowed to go free.

Of the six orphanages and many policemen who took part in the trade, only one orphanage's director was punished. He was jailed for one year. All the rest went free.

The man told us that for a while the trade went quiet, but now it was running at full speed again, driven by the demand from overseas families willing to pay large sums for a Chinese baby.

He spoke with obvious relish of the inflated prices that had become possible for "finding" a baby. As he described it, the man was helping the babies find a better life in America. You could see how he wished he could return to his old job.

A poisonous truth

We spent the next day filming in the city of Shenzhen, a metropolis of more than 10 million people that didn't exist three decades ago except as a tiny border town and fishing village.

In the late 1970s, China's paramount leader Deng Xiaoping identified Shenzhen as a place to draw in foreign investment and pioneer a revolution in China's industrial technology. And in 1992, Deng again chose Shenzhen to give a new impetus to the country's stalled economic reforms.

But looking at the gap between rich and poor in today's Shenzhen made me deeply aware of the inequities that exist in today's China. It's a city that suffers from rampant materialism, corruption, pollution, prostitution, and the abuse of factory workers, among other woes.

The local government seems to exist only to keep the factories producing, thus bringing in more business and tax revenue. But it does little to protect the workers, many of whom work up to 13 hours a day for an average of \$700 a month—but also for as little as \$300 or less a month.

The China we had experienced in the past two weeks left us appalled and despairing. It was a short journey but affected me deeply and remains hard to express, like a dark and poisonous truth caught in my throat.

On to Cambodia

We arrived in Phnom Penh. An old friend and tuk tuk driver picked us up, and we trundled through the anarchic traffic to a cool, calm second-floor apartment complete with a cozy balcony.

Phnom Penh's two and three-story skyline, empty narrow side streets, and quiet skies were a welcome relief for us after documenting trafficking in some of Asia's more challenging environments.

We barely had time for an hour's sleep when our taxi honked its horn downstairs. After a prolonged negotiation, we were off to nearby Kandal province on what was supposed to be about an hour's drive.

However, a short while later, as we turned from the main road onto dirt tracks and began to thread through the countryside of paddies and palm trees, it became clear that our destination was probably somewhat out of the way.

Our driver, realizing that this trip was not going to be kind to his shiny new Camry, leaned further forward into the steering wheel, easing the car over every kink and corrugation with a tense and disapproving focus.

In Cambodia, one quickly discovers that a standard family sedan can do pretty much anything in the hands of a driver with a fare and somewhere to go.

We pushed on for several hours over rickety wooden bridges and down deep potholes, gingerly and it seemed endlessly driving along a dirt road. Eventually, passing faded Cambodian People's Party billboards and under the smiling face of Prime Minister Hun Sen, we rolled into a village.

The posters watched over a series of villages consisting of a noodle hut and a few houses, cows, and chickens. People watched suspiciously as we drove past. Not many Westerners had been seen along these roads.

Slowing down to check our directions, we were joined by a smiling man riding a small motorbike, a moto. It turned out to be Vannak, the man we had come to see.

We knew from our conversations with the legal organization representing him that Vannak had recently returned to Cambodia after many years of being a slave on a Thai fishing vessel.

We had come to ask him about his experiences.



Vannak in his brother's home in Kandal Province outside Phnom Penh in central Cambodia.

Noticing the darkening clouds and not wanting to get bogged down in a sudden downpour, I suggested we stop for a while at a noodle stall.

But Vannak warned us against stopping, as his unusual meeting with foreigners would attract lots of interest and everyone in the village would come out to find out what was going on.

So we drove on, following Vannak on his moto along the rough track for another 10 kilometers or so, until we arrived about an hour later in an even smaller village.

With a broad smile, Vannak led us up a palm-lined lane, past children on bikes and boys dragging buffaloes along by nose ropes, and through a fence of wooden stakes, where the whole family was waiting to welcome us.

Vannak was staying in a wooden shack with his aged grandmother, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge. Her gentle smile warmed the single spare room, and it was clear where Vannak's warmth came from.

The shack, with its dirt floor and smoky fire, was too dark for filming. So we decided that it would be easier to move next door where his brother owned a two-story brick house.

We all sat together on a large wooden bed frame on the ground under the house, and Vannak's sister-in-law brought us fresh coconuts, cut open and provided with a straw for drinking the juice.

After we explained to Vannak why we had come, he was keen to tell us his story. His trust in us, it seemed, was based on our relationship with a German lawyer who had rescued him from Malaysia after six years of slavery. By then, Vannak had become a broken shell of a man, no longer of any use to his traffickers.

His trials had begun when he first left his pregnant wife to find a job in Thailand to make some money for their unborn child. He had expected to find work easily and return in time to see their baby born, but he was wrong.

Vannak's nightmare

His story was one of horror.

From the time he crossed the border into Thailand, his liberty was taken from him. What followed were years of imprisonment and forced labor on a fishing boat in the middle of the sea.



Work was an endurance test, and torture was common. If men grew sick and didn't recover, they were tossed alive overboard never to be seen again. Some men went mad.

The ship's captain and crew never once showed them any kindness.

They were indeed slaves, and their only value was their ability to make money for their owners. Their plight was the same inhuman trap so many migrants from Cambodia, Burma, and Laos are caught in when they come looking for work in Thailand.

One night, Vannak and one of his fellow workers saw a chance and jumped overboard, clutching an empty fish-sauce container. They floated to shore in the darkness and, when the sun rose, realized they had landed in Malaysia.

Soon after, they were seized by the police, and despite Vannak's strong requests to be sent back to Cambodia, the police sold him again, this time to a Chinese agent who sold them to a palm plantation.

After two more years, Vannak made it home. Now the worst thing for him, apart from the physical torture he had suffered, was the fact that when he finally got home, his wife and family didn't believe his story.

They thought that he had just taken off with another woman somewhere in Thailand. His story seemed too incredible to believe and was hard to explain in detail. But he couldn't forget it.

After talking, we followed him back to his shack, where he pulled out his pen and sketchbook.

Unlike other victims who disappear or have no way of recording their story, Vannak possesses a unique way of sharing his experiences. Vannak is a gifted visual artist, drawing in pen and pencil from what seems to be a photographic memory.

We asked him to draw for the cameras, thinking he would just draw a rough sketch as an example of how he would draw from memory. But with sure gestures his pen began to work, and what he drew was remarkable.

He drew a fishing boat riding the waves, with exhausted men working on the aft deck, and then a powerful likeness of himself, true to his features and character, standing there staring out of the page back at us.

His ordeal on the sea was seared into his memory.

He explained that he wanted to tell his story so that other men didn't fall for the same thing. His drawings were how he was attempting to do that.

As the sun dipped and the light dimmed, we ate dinner with Vannak and his family. They served us a feast of rice, chicken curry, fish soup, and more coconuts—a much more extravagant table than they could really afford.

It was getting late, and our driver wanted to avoid driving the difficult roads in a seasonal afternoon downpour. We thanked Vannak and promised to visit again soon.

Heading back to the city, we were simply amazed by his story and by his art. The rain poured down, the skies grew grey and then black, and all we could think about was Vannak's nightmare on the ocean.

That night how lucky and safe our quiet bedrooms felt as we lay down to sleep, listening to the thunder rage in the violent heavens far above.

New roads

A few days later, we received confirmation of a contact for our next story, on the impact of new roads on small communities and how they often lead to the increased trafficking of young men and women.



Until recently, many villages were only accessible by motorbike, cart, or on foot.

We jumped into a hired car again the following morning and settled in for an all-day drive up Highway One to Banlung, the capital of Cambodia's northeastern Rattanakiri province.

Having taken this trip before, we knew to expect the unexpected, with floods, car crashes, collapsed bridges, or just sudden impassable muddy sections of road where traffic is pulled through by rope, or even by buffalo.

You never know in advance if you might find yourself stranded somewhere in the hottest sun, or struck in a ditch and waiting on the side of the road in the middle of the night for someone to come and pick you up.

How much things have changed in the once-remote northeast!

Where once the drive could take 12 hours, a smooth sealed road covered the whole distance, and the drive took no more than five hours. Only over the last few kilometers did the tarmac turn into dirt again.

But locals toiling in the sun with kramas on their heads and lumbering graders and bulldozers lined this section. We asked our driver to stop beside some of the workers, all local people whose villages were until recently accessible only by motorbike, cart, or on foot.

As we filmed the workers, we chatted with them about the road, which they all saw as a good thing. They toiled in small family groups, sleeping on the side of the road and laboring all day on the bare road in the heat and dust.

Much of their work consisted of breaking rocks down into gravel, and they were getting paid a pittance for the work.

They would soon close this last gap in the long black ribbon of traffic from the capital to the provincial capital. Nothing could more clearly speak about the changing times in Cambodia. This highway now stretched all the way to the border of Vietnam, just two hours away.

But these developments had brought with them opportunities for every kind of enterprise, good and bad.

BBQ for breakfast

When we arrived in Banlung, the first thing we noticed was the lack of dust. The roads were all sealed, and we almost missed the rust-red dust that used to coat everything the last time we were here.

The next morning, not long after the sun rose, we gathered at one of the town's social centers, Tannam's restaurant.

Everyone seemed to breakfast here, businessmen, aid workers, policemen, and travelers all together eating plates of BBQ pork and rice, Bai Sak Cherook, a bowl of noodle soup, or a French roll, butter, and jam.

We had already ordered and were just getting our food when our contact arrived on the back of his friend's moto.

He was a remarkable journalist, one of the most respected members of the local community, and a man who had fearlessly made some very powerful enemies in his work on illegal logging in Ratanakiri's once-vast forests.

We ate together as the local crowd enjoyed the spectacle of the World Wrestling Federation matches playing on TVs in every corner of the restaurant. We sipped tea or cups of strong, oily mountain coffee, served in glasses and sweetened with dollops of condensed milk.

Living in hiding

With our bellies full, we headed out of town into the mountains to find a small village where we had heard a young woman and her mother were in hiding from human traffickers.

The tarmac road lasts for a few kilometers, but soon we were back on the dirt. Usually these dirt roads are more comfortable by motorbike than car, as this enables a rider to avoid the most dramatic drops and bumps.

But our driver, in his very smart and well-waxed golden Pajero, seemed to relish the chance to demonstrate his cross-country skills.

With a flourish, he guided the car over billowing dunes of red dust and through holes in the road that would have easily swallowed a small car. Then, rounding a corner, we were stopped in our tracks by a deep stream with no bridge over it.

We stopped at a dead end, with the car left sitting at a 45-degree angle facing down to the stream. We assumed this was the end. There was no way forward.

But then, quite amazingly, in a flurry of activity the driver leaped out into the baking midday heat. From nowhere, he produced fence poles and tree stumps and transformed them into a bridge in front of our eyes.

Surely there was no way we could get over to the other side in this huge car.

The driver seemed confident and determined, though, measuring the wheels and checking the angles. Then he slowly drove down and onto the improvised structure.

We held our breath, looking out of the windows down into the deep water and waiting for a sudden drop into the stream.

And then we were across and heading again down the road, the driver making no fuss, but with just the twinkle of a proud glint in his eyes.

The village turned out to be a cluster of about 10 wooden shacks. As we got out of the car, we were greeted by a mother and her young daughter, the women we had come to meet.

The girl was excited to meet us, watching us with a wide smile and shining eyes. Her thin and small mother, however, had a world-weary air.

The whole village gathered around us, curious and interested in our cameras.

Many of these people would never have seen the lights of Phnom Penh. Some would rarely have traveled even to Banlung, just 20 miles away.

In this village with maybe a single generator, life goes on with little awareness of the ever-growing metropolises of Asia where millions of lives are framed in concrete and glass.



"The whole village gathered around us."

After several attempts to find a quiet place to shoot an interview with the girl and her mother, we discovered that there was no way to extricate them from the rest of their community.

It was a comical process.

We moved from under a tree, with everyone gathered around us. They stared into the viewfinder over my shoulder and leaned around to look into the lens. Then we moved to a house, with everyone still following along.

So, going with the flow, we set up our cameras, and when everyone was sitting happily around us, we began to interview the girl.

As the girl told her story, her smile was quickly replaced by tears as she remembered her fear and the cost of her escape. She told us how a friend and the father of the friend had tricked her into leaving the village without telling her mother.

The village offered no work and no school, and with just herself and her mother in the house, there seemed to be no escape from their constant poverty.

The girl believed the traffickers. A new and exciting life waited for her in Phnom Penh, and so she went with them while her mother was away.

Destined to be exported

The young girl's hope and excitement was extinguished as soon as she arrived in Phnom Penh.

There, in an office building in a new development, she was thrust into a dark room and locked in with many other young village girls.

They realized they had all been told the same story. They were coming to the city to find work and a life and to make money.

Talking to the other girls, it was then that she learnt they were all destined to be exported as laborers to Malaysia and that she would probably never see her mother again.

Back in the village, her mother was desperate when she found her daughter gone.

She somehow uncovered her daughter's trail, and with the determination and insight of a trained detective discovered where she was being held.

But still the girl was a slave. She had been sold, and the slave traders in Phnom Penh and the chain of traffickers working with them needed to be paid. The mother had no choice but to save her daughter by selling everything she owned, her house and land, to raise the money and buy her daughter's freedom.

As she finished telling her story the girl's tears dried up. The past lifted from her face and light filled her eyes again.

Stay by my side forever

Her measure of hope had been restored by her mother's remarkable act. Her mother's face glowed as she watched her daughter smile, basking in the attention. We could only wonder at the rarity of such a happy ending to these kinds of stories.

But even though she is free, they live in hiding for fear of retribution from the traffickers. They have no assets and no prospects.

As we packed up to leave, we could hear the mother telling her daughter in a stern voice, over and over again: "Never leave again without telling me. You must stay by my side forever."./.