

# Thailand: Saving the Rainforest — Saving the Culture

by Elizabeth Turner

**O**n April 23rd hundreds of Thai citizens, the governor of the Songkhla province and about fifty young monks, chanting, welcomed the pilgrims at the Thai-Malay border. Women and children filled our arms with beautiful flowers and bottles of water.

Thailand is lush with rain forests, penetrated here and there with dramatic dragon-back mountains and high narrow hills that rise straight up like loaves of bread standing on end. Many pilgrims found the food to be the best in Southeast Asia. Wherever we stayed, the villagers prepared sumptuous varieties of feasts. They dedicated themselves to urging us to eat our weight in food at every meal.

The pilgrimage in Thailand was filled with meetings, bus rides and an occasional train trip. We mainly did symbolic walking, usually around the municipal centers, or were dropped off a few kilometers from a war memorial to which we would walk in prayer.



Photo: Bill Ledger

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We were impressed by the professionals who took time from their medical practices, teaching and Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) jobs to be our guides and teachers. Their knowledge of Thailand's problems, joined with progressive solutions, and the problems of their neighbors in Burma and Cambodia gave us much hope for the future. They called what is happening to Thailand in the way of commercial land and capitalistic consumer-driven development "the war of structural violence." Their very deep-rooted sense of community and spirituality is being threatened in the most basic way with the disappearance of the rainforest.

At the Burmese border near Three Pagoda Pass, we offered interfaith prayer for the victims of Burmese repression. Ethnic minorities have been fleeing into Thailand to avoid being forced into unpaid labor gangs, building a natural gas pipeline through the rainforest and working on the Ye-Tavoy railroad. Railroads are still being built in Burma by forced, slave labor as they were fifty years ago in Southeast Asia by the invading Japanese. We visited various cemeteries containing the bodies of tens of thousands of prisoners of war (POW) whom the Japanese captured during World War II and kept in inhuman living conditions while building the railroad through Thailand linking Burma with Malaysia. We walked ten kilometers over this infamous "Death Railway," crossing the bridge over the river Kwai. Throughout the countries of Southeast Asia, and especially in Thailand, we became dramatically aware of World War II from the sheer number of cemeteries and memorials. Some of us learned for the first time that twenty million people were killed in the Asian-Pacific theater of the war.

We walked along rows of headstones, with epitaphs to the dead from loved ones in Allied countries—Denmark, Belgium, Australia, England, Scotland and others. In the POW cemetery at Khao Poon, one soldier's tombstone read "Our home is dark without thee. We miss thee everywhere." The dead soldier was identified: 583340 Private J. Hackett, The Cambridgeshire Regt., 13 February 1943.

For the most part our hosts throughout the provinces were Theravada Buddhist monks. We slept on floors or in hammocks. We stayed in several wats (temples) deep in the forest. One was built on a sandy island, all beach, with waters too dangerous for swimming. We looked out upon the waves in the moonlight and listened to their lapping at the shores. We bathed ourselves from fifty gallon drums: pouring water over ourselves, soaping up, then rinsing. We had received written instruction on how to bathe outdoors: "You will need two sarongs (women) or *pakrama* bathing cloths (men). You use the first to change out of your clothes under, and bathe in; the second is used to dry, and then change out of the wet one. You put your clothes on over this one. If you are unfamiliar with the process, ask a Thai walker of your gender to show you how it's done. Nudity is absolutely unacceptable." Not everyone was successful on the first or second try. The monks were not amused.

Throughout the provinces, remarkable speakers, both religious and secular, talked to us of peace. A day-long seminar on "Past Wars, Future Peace" was held at Thammasat University in Bangkok. In open forums we talked about the suffering we had witnessed during our five months of walking. They wanted to hear our reflections on peace from this experience. Dr. Prayoon told us: "Nature is at peace with

itself. Peace is the natural order of what we call 'the natural world.'”

A highlight of the pilgrimage was a day and night visit to a Karen village, a native preserve near the Thai-Burmese border. The Karen people have lived in harmony with nature in this preserve for over 200 years. Their right to stay here is being challenged by politically motivated “wildlife conservancy” considerations. Pilgrim Corinne Joy describes our experience:

We made a 9-kilometer walk in the hottest part of the day in the hottest time of the year (102°F) on a road so steep and rutted that it was impassable to anything but 4-wheel-drive vehicles. Recently there had been fighting in the area and we were hoping to bring a message of peace. We discovered a beautiful village where we quickly cooled off in the river, watching as a hand-hewn, water-powered rice husker made from two logs thumped up and down, up and down. We were served traditional foods of spiced rice and jack fruit and drank tea from sections of bamboo. Surprisingly, it seemed like almost everyone there smoked a mild, home-grown tobacco in “cigarettes” that were around 6” long and ½” thick!

At night we heard stories about how trees were treated as individuals and certain species would never be cut down. An elder spoke of their belief that everything is related and that we are all sisters and brothers together. The evening ended when we were treated to the Siamese dancing of women and children, accompanied by men playing the haunting music of mandolins, flutes and drums.

While in Bangkok, we prepared for our walk into Cambodia. We were informed at this time that our backpacks were too large and that we would have to downsize our gear. We shopped for smaller backpacks, shipped

excess things home, replaced our boots with sandals, and took advantage of a chance to purchase cheaper airline tickets for the remaining Pilgrimage itinerary. Much discussion was held about who was prepared to walk, both physically and spiritually, in Cambodia. We were deepening in our understanding of what it took to walk for peace.

The following day we walked in prayer to Lumpini Park and around and through the Park, a distance of about five and a half kilometers. The governor of Bangkok led us in a tree planting ceremony where a bronze plaque inscribed “Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace and Life 1995” was permanently affixed to a stone monument.

Media coverage was extensive. Province newspapers carried pictures and stories of our local activities. A Bangkok daily did a summary of the Pilgrimage with a full, two-page color spread of photos—at the Democracy Monument, at Khao Bandai Nang where many Allied troops had been killed as they came through a pass, of the many banners at Hat Yai train station, of pilgrims walking on the “Death Railway,” of the incense offering at the POW cemetery at Kanchanaburi and the wreath ceremony at the Veeratha Monument, of interfaith prayer at Three Pagoda Pass at the Burmese border. There was a thoughtful photo of Reverend Sasamori of Japan and Phra Phaisan Visalo, our Thai coordinator, guide and teacher. Among the photos was a picture of the peace poster distributed throughout the provinces. Kun, a Thai batik artist, designed a Thai Interfaith Pilgrimage logo which was used on the posters, buttons and T-shirts. We each received a T-shirt and wore it knowing that it spoke eloquently of the spirit for peace that motivated the myriad preparations that preceded our coming.

Television and radio gave daily reports on our activities. During the monthly provincial authority meeting, the

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**A pilgrim presents  
peace cranes to a  
Thai monk.**

governor of Nakhon Si Thammarat province recognized the Pilgrimage's activity as one of the two important activities in the province. A note from the Nakhon Si Thammarat coordinator expresses the extent of preparation and citizen participation, "May I inform you that all of us from twenty organizations, governmental, non governmental and people-oriented, feel much pleasure in welcoming you, especially the villagers at Tha Pae. During collecting and clearing the

kitchen, they told each other their pleasure and happiness in this opportunity the pilgrims gave them." We experienced this degree of participation and superb coordination by the provincial organizers throughout our stay in Thailand.