

Burma's Forgotten War and the Power of Resilience and Hope

By Patrick Keeney

Last December, I set out on a road trip to the city of Mae Sot on the Thailand-Myanmar border with my friend Mon, a Burmese poet, journalist, and lifelong activist for democratic reform.

Like many Burmese patriots, Mon refuses to acknowledge the name "Myanmar," imposed by the ruling generals in 1989 as an act of cultural erasure and authoritarian revisionism. For her, the country remains—now and always—Burma, a name that carries the weight of history and the aspirations of a people yearning for freedom.

As we travelled, the soulful voice of Burmese pop star [Mary Soe](#) provided the soundtrack to our discussions on Burma's turbulent past and its fragile experiment with democracy. The promise of reform that began in 2011 was shattered in February 2021 when the [Tatmadaw](#) (Myanmar's military), citing baseless claims of electoral fraud, seized power from [Aung San Suu Kyi's elected government](#), plunging the nation into yet another chapter of crisis and repression.

In the months that followed, protests erupted nationwide, evolving into a widespread armed resistance movement. Ethnic militias and newly formed [People's Defence Forces \(PDFs\)](#) joined forces to fight back against the junta. The Tatmadaw responded with characteristic brutality: mass arrests, executions, airstrikes on civilian areas, and forced conscription. The toll has been staggering. Over [50,000 people have been killed, including 8,000 civilians](#), while more than 3 million have been displaced.

Despite this, the resistance has made significant gains. In late 2024, the [Arakan Army](#) captured a key regional military

headquarters, signalling a turning tide. Meanwhile, the junta's forces are suffering from mass defections, forcing them to resort to abducting young men and women into military service.

[Mae Sot](#), a bustling Thai border town, is both a commercial hub and a refuge for thousands of Burmese exiles fleeing the war. Mon had arranged for us to visit [Joy House](#), a community centre where refugees find solace and rebuild their lives through art and storytelling.

In Burmese, there are no words for “depression” or “post-traumatic stress disorder.” Instead, healing is framed in terms of resilience and hope. Music, painting, and storytelling are central to the process, providing an outlet for people to reconnect with their culture and identity.



Finding beauty in a troubled land: Myanmar is a captivating country scarred by years of violence; the author's road trip to the frontier took him to Joy House, where director Nay Chi Win (left) has created a sanctuary and place of healing. (Source of right photo: eGuide Travel, licensed under CC BY 2.0)

Nay Chi Win, the director of Joy House, emphasized the urgency of mental health support. “We need international collaboration to develop programs that use the arts as a bridge to healing,” she told us. Listening to her, I was struck by the thought that true, humane healing may lie not in clinical treatments or pharmacological solutions, but in the power of connection,

creativity, and the shared narratives that restore dignity and meaning to shattered lives.



This theme of storytelling as resistance was evident at the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) Film Festival held at Chiang Mai University. One film, *The Wingless Bird*, chronicled the life of a young mother who lost her arm in an airstrike while pregnant with her second child. Struggling to support her family with only a first-grade education, she set up a roadside grocery stall. The film captured her quiet resilience but also the crushing weight of her uncertainty.

Another powerful stop in Mae Sot was the [Museum of Political Prisoners](#). Run by [Ko Bo Kyi](#), a former political prisoner and founder of the [Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#), the museum preserves the stories of those who have suffered

under Myanmar's oppressive regimes.

The museum's unassuming exterior offers little hint of the darkness memorialized within. Visitors enter through a deliberately low doorway, forcing them to crouch—an architectural reminder of the humiliation endured by Myanmar's political prisoners.

Inside, photographs of the fallen line the walls, alongside testimonies of those who survived. Smuggled letters, diaries, and even makeshift instruments used in prison reflect the resilience and defiance of those who refused to be broken.



Ko Bo Kyi, who endured seven years of imprisonment and unspeakable torment, has dedicated his life to ensuring that the voices of Burma's political prisoners are not consigned to oblivion. For him, preserving this history is not merely an act of remembrance but a vital weapon in the struggle for justice and democracy—a defiant assertion that the past will not be erased, nor its lessons ignored.

The Museum of Political Prisoners is both a memorial and a call to conscience, a bulwark against the amnesia upon which authoritarian regimes depend. Within its walls, the testimonies of the persecuted refuse to be reduced to mere footnotes in history. Each artifact, each letter smuggled from a prison cell, each photograph of the fallen, stands as an indictment of tyranny and an affirmation of resistance. In a world quick to move on, the museum insists that memory is an act of defiance, that dignity endures, and that the fight for freedom is never truly extinguished.

As Mon and I parted ways, I reflected on the courage of the Burmese people. In the face of mass displacement, systemic violence, and global indifference, they continue to resist, rebuild, and tell their stories.

As the world's gaze remains fixed on Gaza and Ukraine, it must not turn away from Burma, where the fight for democracy is another crucial front in the broader battle against totalitarianism—a struggle that transcends borders and defines our collective commitment to freedom.

Mae Sot's stark contrasts—commerce and exile, despair and defiance—reflect Burma's enduring struggle. At Joy House, art refuses the totalitarian silence; at the Museum of Political Prisoners, memory resists erasure. Both embody Aung San Suu Kyi's vision for her immiserated nation: resilience as a moral imperative.

My journey with Mon was a sobering reminder of freedom's fragility and the courage it demands. Burma's people refuse to relinquish their future. Their defiance, in the face of a regime that dreads nothing more than their unwavering faith in a better tomorrow, stands as a universal testament to hope's enduring power—a force that no tyranny can fully extinguish. It is a lesson for us all.

This is Mr Keeney's digest of a longer article first published in [C2C Journal](#)