

The Nation

HUMAN RIGHTS AWARD : Shan woman wins honour

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Documenting sexual violence against Burmese refugees recognised as huge contribution

A 23-year-old Shan activist has been named a winner of the 2005 Reebok Human Rights Award for her struggle against the rape of women in Burma's Shan state.

Charm Tong, a member of Shan Women's Action Network (Swan), was recognised as a resolute defender of the rights of refugee women and children on the Thai-Burmese border.

Charm Tong has been combating sexual violence against women in her homeland and along the Thai-Burmese border for years. She was a researcher in a team that produced the report "Licence to Rape", a document that revealed the Burmese military regime's use of sexual violence against ethnic women in Shan state.

"Licence to Rape" details 173 incidents of rape and other forms of sexual violence by Burmese troops committed against 625 girls and women in Shan state, mostly between 1996 and 2001.

Charm Tong is herself a refugee from Burma. At the age of six, her parents sent her to the Thai border to escape the war between the Shan ethnic minority and the Burmese government. She was forced to leave her hometown in central Shan state. Living as a refugee on Thai soil, she received an education at a local orphanage, learning about and witnessing the fate of young refugees around her.

Many of her friends ended up in the sex trade or working as child labourers.

At 16, Charm Tong joined Swan and helped coordinate a campaign to draw international attention to the plight of Shan women – both the victims of rape in her homeland and those fleeing to Thailand. The young activist took a risk working along the Thai-Burmese border to interview victims and document their cases in "Licence to Rape", which was released in 2002.

After releasing the report, the Swan office was forced to close. Charm Tong and her Swan co-workers then worked underground, moving from one place to another in a bid to stay safe. Thai authorities, fearing the report would harm bilateral ties with Burma, threatened them.

The report grabbed international attention and was high on the agenda at the 59th annual meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights.

Rangoon has consistently denied the allegations detailed in the report.

Burma's Prime Minister Lt-General Soe Win last week addressed the annual meeting of the Myanmar [Burma] Women's Affairs Federation, and said Burmese women enjoyed equal rights with men and had done so since birth.

"Unlike the women of other nations, Myanmar [Burmese] women do not need to make demands nor struggle for women's rights as they have enjoyed these rights since birth," Soe Win was quoted as saying in *The New Light of Myanmar*.

Charm Tong said Soe Win was making a laughing stock of himself by saying such things.

"Everyone knows that Burma is ruled by a military dictatorship, ruled by men at every level, who are denying women their rights in every sphere of society," she said, adding that the Myanmar Women's Affairs Federation was just a token organisation, totally controlled by the military.

"It used to be headed by Khin Nyunt's wife, and now that Khin Nyunt has been ousted, it is headed by Soe Win's wife. What kind of an independent women's organisation is that?" she added.

The Reebok Human Rights Award began in 1988, to recognise young activists who have made significant contributions to human rights.

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http://www.nationmultimedia.com/2005/03/09/national/data/national_16665613.html