

## Soldiers Approaching

“Bak Si Ung! Wake up! Something is wrong outside!” my wife said.

With eyes still filled with sleep, I tried not to listen.

“Hmm...”

“Bak Si Ung! Wake up! Wake up!”

The panic in her voice was clearly recognizable. Our four-month-old daughter was crying in her crib.

Suddenly, our bedroom was awash in a red color. First, as sharp as the sun, then it slowly faded away. It made a high sound, like fireworks. Then I knew what it was.

Flares.

But who was shooting them? I heard distant cries of someone, yelling orders to an unknown group of men.

It was the military.

Fast as I could, I jumped out of bed and quickly dressed myself.

“Stay here! Don’t make a noise!” I whispered to Cin Cin.

Quickly, I opened the door to see my son, Biak Si Ung. He looked afraid, holding onto his stuffed animal, a little bear.

“Go to your mother and shut the door of the bedroom, now!”

I ran towards the exit and went outside. The air was filled with the glaring flares. Other men were looking with fear at the approaching army. Though it was dark, I could clearly distinguish three small regiments of soldiers. There must have been more than a hundred men. We outnumbered them, but they carried heavy machinery and automatic rifles.

They spread quickly through the village, occupying some tactical spots where they could overlook a greater area. We were too stunned to do anything. Before I knew it, two soldiers were placed at each corner of the little square, yelling at us to stay where we were.

Our village eldest was approaching from his house. The colonel of the army walked straight to him, not giving any of us the slightest glance. He spoke with him, although it seemed more that the colonel was making an announcement, without any discussion.

He turned and inspected his troops, talking to another officer.

“Make camp at the south ridge.”

“Ling! What is happening? What did he say to you?” asked one of the men nearby.

Ling didn't respond immediately, looking with a deep stare at the soldiers, as if he was judging the situation. Then, with a sad expression on their face, he looked at us.

“They occupied our village for economic reasons.. We will have to work for them. Don't panic and go back to your beds. He'll come back tomorrow to inform us further on the details.”

As quiet as everyone was before, now discussion filled the entire square. Men looked angrily at the soldiers, and then to the gathered group.

“Just do as they say. You all know what will happen if we refuse. They will put pressure on us,” one said.

“Unbelievable! You just accept them barging in here like it's their village?” another shouted angrily.

“Calm yourself!” our elder said, “Stay quiet and do as you are told. Maybe they will not stay long.”

“You actually think that?”

“I will pray, and so should you all. Go back to bed.”

I returned home, relieved that there was no violence involved. Nevertheless, an uttermost sadness takes a hold of me. What will the future bring? I fear nothing good. However, we will go through this, as long as I can keep my family together. Since my father’s death the previous spring, there was no guide left to keep me on my path. *I* was that guide now.

I went back to bed, reassuring my wife that everything was okay, although I was not convinced of it myself.

The next morning, nine other heads of family and me are summoned to the colonel’s cabin. As we moved out of our village, we looked surprised at the changing scenery. Where we should look upon the grassy fields, which continued on the southern slope of the hill, now a military camp was erected, with large tents, small guardhouses and a fence surrounding the area. Most of it was prepared in a hurry to provide the basic needs, but more groups of men were working tirelessly to improve

the camp. There were even the beginnings of barracks made.

Three soldiers escorted us, one on each side and one behind us. We made our way through the camp. People were buzzing everywhere; sounds of construction were carried away by the warm eastern wind.

We stopped at a large barrack and we were signaled to enter. No one dared to speak. Inside there was not much to see. There were just a couple of chairs, maps of the region on the wall and a large desk where a thin man was looking at the wall. He carried his colonel's hat and uniform. An ashtray filled with cigarettes was beside him, and a small army-issued pistol.

He was sitting backwards from us, not moving at all. We stood like that for a couple of minutes. Or was it five? Ten? No one dared open his mouth or make himself more comfortable by taking a seat.

The soldiers who escorted us took their positions at each corner of the barrack, not letting us out of their sight for a second.

Slowly, the general turned his chair toward us, looking satisfied that we had waited so long without

moving or speaking. He observed our group, letting his gaze fall on each of the men standing before him.

“Welcome,” he said, with a cold authoritative tone.

“State your names and property for the record.”

“Sze Ma, owner of four acres of land.” The old friend of my father looked tired and weary, but he had a sharp look in his eye.

“Ku Me, three acres.”

“Bak Si Ung, four...”

The administrator wrote down our names and properties. The colonel kept his eyes fixed on us the entire time.

When the administrator was done, he gave the paper to the colonel who scanned it quickly.

“Good.” He turns to the map behind him again and looks at it for a while.

“You live in a beautiful surrounding, gentlemen. And fertile.”

We looked at each other. What did this man want from us? He turned back his chair.

“It’s time the land is used for all of our interests.” He looked at the paper lying before him.

“Starting tomorrow, you will grow palaver on your land. I think one acre each as a start will do just fine.”

He said it with the arrogant authority of his function. Even if we refused at first, we would eventually be forced to do it. We knew it, and he knew it as well.

“Report to the officer at the front gate of the camp. He’ll provide the necessary items. Work begins at 06.00 am. If we don’t see you on the fields at that time, the army will confiscate all your land. Even then, you will still have to work on it for the national cause.”

National cause? Growing palaver on our fields?

“What will it be used for...sir?” one of us asked quite naive.

“What do you think? Our government needs to gain more income from its own riches. This is the only way we can sustain our nation. You will have to pay taxes for your land.” I think with ‘sustaining’ he meant *themselves*.

Drugs. We knew of rumors that many production plants solely based on the production of palaver were created in the country. People were forced to produce it, and had to work even harder on less ground to sustain

themselves. We all thought it was just rumors, but now we were in the middle of it.

With a nod of his head, we were led out of the chamber. Walking uphill to the entrance, we saw soldiers with carriages, filled with seeds, small plants and equipment.

“I’m the supervisor of this group. Report here tomorrow at 05.30 am. Don’t be late.”

We were pushed out of the camp. No one uttered a word during the return home. I rushed to the field, trying to save at least some of the crops, but it was no use. The soldiers had trampled many of my crops. All the ripe crops had been taken, most probably to be eaten by the soldiers in the camp. They did their work thoroughly.

Back home, I sat at the table with my hands wrapped around my head. I realized that this is it. The life that my family and I knew was over.