



# Blood and Gold

## Inside Burma's Hidden War

2012 • 24 minutes • Directed by Jason Motlagh and filmed by Steve Sapienza  
Originally broadcast by Al Jazeera as part of the series *People & Power*

*Blood and Gold: Inside Burma's Hidden War* explores the intensification of violence as a cease-fire collapses and a civil war flares up once again between Burma's government military forces and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) in the country's Kachin State.

Myanmar or Burma? Nations, organizations, and people refer to the country differently for political, personal, and other reasons. This teacher's guide uses both terms interchangeably in keeping with the names used by the curator, director, and other sources cited in different sections of the guide. See the activities section below for a class assignment related to the names of the country.

**VIEWER ADVISORY: THIS FILM SHOWS INJURED SOLDIERS AND CHILDREN**



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Face to Face Media 2020



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*Blood and Gold  
offers many insights  
into the devastation  
and hardships of  
modern Burma at  
both human and  
environmental levels.*

## WHY I SELECTED THIS FILM

I chose this film for its insights into the complex political, economic, and environmental dynamics in northern Burma's Kachin State, which borders China. The story was recorded by two American journalists, with support from the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. It was filmed on the battlefields; in the camps and refugee settlements, where tens of thousands of residents have fled from the fighting; and in the offices of military and government officials hoping to end the strife. As the Burmese military, the Kachin insurgents, and state-owned Chinese businesses compete for control over the region's rich resources, a civil war drags on. The impact of the Chinese-funded Myitsone dam project figures prominently in this documentary, as it does in *Dams, Drugs, and Democracy*, which is also part of the GEJ collection.

## SUGGESTED SUBJECT AREAS

Asian Studies	Dams	Natural Resources
Burma	Ethnic Studies	Religion
China	Insurgency	Resource Extraction
Christianity	Kachin Peoples	Southeast Asia

## THE KACHIN

The Kachin people comprise several interconnected sociolinguistic groups living in the hills in northern Myanmar's Kachin State, in China's Yunnan province, and in Northeastern India. The KIA, the military wing of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), has fought the Burmese military on and off for decades in a bid for greater political rights and control over lands rich in minerals, timber, and, more recently, Chinese-funded hydropower and pipeline projects. As depicted in *Blood and Gold*, a cease-fire agreement, brokered in 1994, lasted until 2011, when the Burmese Army attacked a KIA outpost near a disputed dam site. The KIA ramped up its offensive, calling into question the authority of a new, nominally civilian Burmese government that repeatedly ordered it to stop fighting. At the time of filming, more than 75,000 ethnic Kachin civilians had been displaced. Figures from 2020 now put the number at 120,000. Despite attempts to broker a new peace agreement, the Kachin conflict is in its ninth year since the end of the cease-fire.



## SYNOPSIS

*Blood and Gold: Inside Burma's Hidden War* examines the conflict in Burma's Kachin State when it erupted in 2011 after a 17 year cease-fire. Filmmakers Jason Motlagh and Steve Sapienza interview Kachin military personnel, farmers, recruits, a journalist, a scholar, an aid worker, and a government official about the continuing war. The journalists also travel deep inside the war zone to film KIA headquarters near the border with China, military training sessions, active battlegrounds, and refugee camps in and around the KIA's administrative capital of Laiza. Back in Yangon and the capital city of Naypyidaw, they document the international response to the opening up of Burma under its new president, Thein Sein, a former military general. The journalists find that the northern state's rich resources, including a massive Chinese-funded hydroelectric project on the Irrawaddy River, are at the heart of the conflict in Kachin. The film concludes with a discussion of the KIA's complicated relations with China.

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE FOCUS OF THE FILM

Environmental justice (the recognition of human rights and the protection of the environment) is often stymied when entrenched interests wage war in order to control natural resources. *Blood and Gold* offers many insights into the devastation and hardships at both human and environmental levels.

## A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

After years of isolation, Burma experienced a political thaw in 2011 that took even jaded observers by surprise. Its military leaders brokered cease-fires with ethnic rebel groups around the country and allowed civilians to play a greater role in the new government. Media and economic freedoms were expanded and hundreds of prisoners were released, among them Aung San Suu Kyi, the democracy activist and Nobel laureate, now a member of parliament. In response, the United States removed all sanctions and reinstated its ambassador after a 22year absence. An investment boom started.

But peace and prosperity in the “new Burma” are not for all.

Widespread land grabbing by powerful business interests is devastating poor farming communities and taking a heavy toll on the environment. In Yangon, the veneer of new construction projects belies widening inequality, official corruption, and self-censorship in the press. And in western Rakhine State, the long-persecuted Rohingya minority is under siege, compelling larger numbers to leave,

*The veneer of new construction projects in Burma belies widening social inequality.*

while in the northern state of Kachin, a brutal civil war between Burmese armed forces and ethnic rebels grinds on. Several thousand people have been killed and more than 100,000 uprooted in a military campaign that rights groups say has deliberately targeted civilians. Now, as ever, Burma's wealth of resources is both a driving force for unrest on far-flung fronts—and a potential source of stability.

—Adapted from Jason Motlagh's essay [“Burma in Transition”](#)

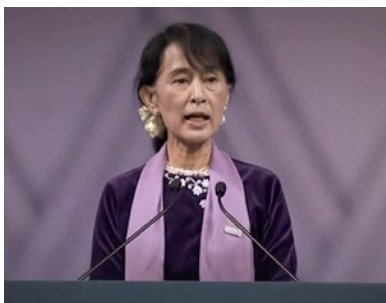
## BACKGROUND

Contemporary Myanmar is bordered to the west by Bangladesh, by China to the north, by Laos to the east, and by Thailand to the east and south. Its roughly 55 million people speak dozens of languages, which belong mostly to the Tibeto-Burman language family.

Burma is home to an equal number of ethnic groups, many of whom live in the hill regions surrounding the fertile lowland river valleys. Ethnic Burmans, living mostly in the lowland areas, are predominantly Buddhist and constitute about 80% to 85% of the population. The remainder of Burma's population includes a great diversity of ethnic groups, such as the Mon, Shan, Karen, Pa'O, Chin, Kachin, Wa, Naga, Rakhine, Lisu, and Rohingya, as well as diverse groups of Indian and Chinese descent.

Since independence from colonial rule after World War II, the country's national development and integration have remained fraught with tensions and fault lines, as many groups—Buddhist and non-Buddhist, Burmese and non-Burmese—have sought greater autonomy and/or continue to feel excluded from equal access to power and resources, both natural and economic. Various attempts to bring peace and stability to Burma's minority regions have had varied and limited success. *Blood and Gold* shows us some of the ramifications in the Kachin lands in the north of Burma.

Viewers of *Blood and Gold* and of *Dams, Drugs, and Democracy* may be more familiar with the Rohingya conflict on Burma's western border with Bangladesh. That conflict has gained notoriety because of the magnitude of the violence and scope of coverage in the media. Many Burmese and Rakhine people consider Rohingya, who are Muslim, to be illegal migrants from Bangladesh. The conflict resulted in mass casualties of Rohingya people and forced displacements of many Rohingya to Bangladesh. A United Nations report issued in 2018 declared that for their actions against the Rohingya people, Myanmar's military commanders should be charged with the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, charges the Myanmar government rejects. For additional information on the conflict in Rohingya, see the supplementary materials/information.



*Widespread land grabbing by powerful business interests is devastating poor farming communities and taking a heavy toll on the environment.*



## KEY LOCATIONS

**Chinese-built resettlement camps** (not named) – meant to house people displaced by the Myitsone dam project

**Irrawaddy River** – the major river artery running much of the country

**Kachin displacement camp in China** – location not given

**Kachin refugee and training camps** – near Laiza

**Laiza** – a city where KIA headquarters are located

**Maiji Yang** – a large town under KIA control on the Chinese border

**Myitkyina** – the government-controlled capital of Kachin state

**Myitsone Dam** – a project by the China Power Investment Corporation

**Naypidaw** – the nation's new capital

**Tang Hpre** – a relocated village near the Myitsone dam

## PEOPLE AND ORGANIZATIONS

**Anawrahta, Bayinnaung, and Alaungpaya** – famous Burmese monarchs

**Asia World** – a Burmese conglomerate

**Aung San Suu Kyi** – leader of the National League for Democracy

**Bertil Lintner** – a journalist

**Captain Malang Naw Mai** – an officer in the KIA

**Child soldiers**

**Father Thomas Gum Rai Aung** – a Catholic parish priest

**General Sumlat Gun Maw** – the KIA's Vice chief of staff

**Hillary Clinton** – the former US Secretary of State, 2009–2013

**Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)**

**Kachin Independence Army (KIA)**

**Matthew Smith** – a member of Human Rights Watch

**May Li Awng** – founder of a grassroots aid group

**Northern Star Trading** – controls gold mining and logging in the government-controlled areas of Kachin

**Pansang Brang** – a 72-year-old farmer

**Refugees** – a mother of six and a 68-year-old rice farmer

**Sean Turnell** – an economics professor, Macquarie University

**Thein Sein** – the president of Burma

**U Htay Oo** – a former general and secretary-general of the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party



## FILM SEQUENCES

### 00:00–00:54 Opening sequence

Massive statues of the three most famous Burmese kings—Anawrahta, Bayinnaung, and Alaungpaya—stand as though reviewing a military parade in Naypyidaw, the new capital. The generals have stepped aside. A new and nominally civilian government, led by President Thein Sein, promises reform. Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy are swept into parliament. Crowds celebrate. Western governments roll back decades of sanctions.



### 00:54–04:30 Armed conflict and documentation of war crimes

The war in Kachin resumes in 2011. Machine gun fire is heard. In Kachin State, near Burma's northern border with China, a 17-year truce collapses and a civil war resumes between the Burmese military and the KIA. Bertil Lintner, a journalist and author, describes the ruling military's interest in controlling and selling natural resources, including timber, minerals, and hydroelectric power.

**02:00** Refugees on the road with ox carts. Seventy-five thousand Kachin civilians have been uprooted. The reform process, Lintner says, allows the government to get away with things that would have been criticized by the international community in the past. In Kachin, journalists accompany a KIA patrol. Capt. Malang Naw Mai describes a fight with the Burmese army over control of two Chinese-funded pipelines that carry gas and oil from the Indian Ocean through Burma to China.

**03:00** Gunfire is exchanged between the KIA and government troops. Capt. Malang Naw Mai says the Burmese army has been using heavier mortars recently. He reports that the Burmese army executed women and children who couldn't get away from the war zone. Villages were burned. Civilians were tortured. This, he says, is why he fights.

**04:00** Matthew Smith, a member of Human Rights Watch, documents war crimes. He confirms that the Burmese military targets civilians, saying that soldiers have killed children "point blank," and that rape and forced labor are common. Fighting is emptying entire villages.



### 04:30–12:00 Water, resources, and relations with China

Father Thomas Gum Rai Aung, a Christian parish priest for several villages some 25 miles north of Myitkyina, the government-controlled capital of Kachin State, says fighting has intensified over the Chinese-funded—but incomplete—Myitsone dam. The project will offer little benefit to locals: 90% of the power is slated to go to China.





**05:00** Father Thomas says that once the dam is finished, it will flood the villages and fields.

The priest's village, Tang Hpre, founded in 1952, provided education and health care for the people in the surrounding mountain villages. Fighting has driven away all but 21 of the 700 people who lived there.



**06:10** The Burmese military exerts control over the people and the resources. It forced 12,000 villagers into two resettlement camps, which were built by the state-owned Chinese power company bankrolling the Myitsone dam project. Residents say they have lost their land and can't earn a living. A farmer is reduced to working in a gold mine.

**06:40** Control over resources is central to the conflict. With villages erased, logging and mining for gold are unobstructed. Mining and logging operations are controlled by one company, Northern Star Trading, which pays off the police, the military, and officials. Local residents are sidelined. Officially, work on the dam was suspended in 2011 by President Thein Sein for environmental reasons. [Nine years later, it remains in limbo—curator.] Funds for dam and pipeline construction are provided by Chinese state-owned companies. Workers are provided by Asia World, a large conglomerate. Economic analyst and consultant Sean Turnell, of Macquarie University, says benefits from developing these projects are “siphoned off” by the military, bypassing the Kachin.



**09:00** KIA Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Sumlat Gun Maw says the KIA warned China that if civil war breaks out around the dam, it will be China's fault because Kachin receives no benefit from the dam. The KIA, meanwhile, survives by collecting taxes on illegal logs and other goods traded to China.



**10:00** KIA soldiers who are badly injured are taken to Chinese hospitals. China's complex relations with Burma are influenced by China's interest in Burma's natural resources and in access to Indian Ocean ports.

**11:00** Burma's officials, such as U Htay Oo, a former general and, at the time of filming, the secretary-general of the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party, advocate close relations with China and support a settlement with the KIA, but little progress has been made.

#### **12:00–20:00 Daily experiences of the conflict**

Back to the fighting. Peace talks fail, and farmers become soldiers. Refugees, including children, cluster in Maiji Yang, on the Chinese border. Relief organizations, such as the one founded by May Li Awng, try to keep up.



*Benefits from the development projects are “siphoned off” by the military, bypassing the Kachin.*



**13:00** Thousands take refuge in Laiza. Food and supplies run short. A mother of six describes the hardships. Her brother and father returned to their village to salvage belongings and were killed by Burmese troops. A rice farmer describes a raid on a village, the death of a woman fleeing, the burning of his village, and the arrest and torture of witnesses.

**14:20** There are 45,000 displaced people under the care of the KIA, Smith says. Some are recruited and trained by the KIA.

**15:00** Several recruits explain their choice. The narration notes that while the Burmese army is mostly Buddhist, most members of the KIA are Christian. A man from eastern China who is both Christian and ethnic Han Chinese explains his reasons for fighting for the Kachin. On the battlefield, civilians and soldiers are at risk from land mines that have been planted by both sides.

**16:10** Some children are used as porters by the Burmese army, in violation of international law. KIA Gen. Sumlat Gun Maw denies using children on the front lines. He says they seek a negotiated settlement but have had no success. The government has signed peace deals in some areas, but not in resource-rich Kachin.

**17:40** U Htay Oo and other government officials blame the lack of progress on the KIA. He denies accusations that the army harms or tortures civilians and outlines the government’s view of the conflict.

**18:55** Smith says human rights violations are being perpetrated largely by the Burmese army and the civilian government bears responsibility for the attacks. Lintner suggests China could play a positive role in resolving the conflict if it wanted to.

**19:28** Ten thousand refugees cross the border into China. China refuses to allow aid workers access to the refugees, sending them back to Burma and into harm’s way. China does not acknowledge the issue, as it could lead to international monitoring. May Li Awng comments over scenes from a camp.

#### **20:19–23:44 International investment and internal narratives**

Doors open for international investment even as the civil war in Kachin continues. Hillary Clinton encourages U.S. businesses to invest in Burma, and many of them are already active.

**21:05** At her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize, Aung San Suu Kyi urges a “true spirit of union” but cautions investors to move carefully until conflicts with the Kachin and other ethnic minority groups are resolved.



**21:45** While there is optimism about the future, Smith says, it's not shared by the Kachin. Things there are worse. Lintner agrees. The need to resolve Burma's ethnic and political problems remains. KIA Gen. Sumlat Gun Maw agrees. Until the ethnic problem is solved, there will be no peace. In Kachin, a new class of KIA soldiers graduates, ready to "protect the people and the land." An anthem proclaims, "Our land is filled with valuable resources. We will protect it from destruction."

**23:44 END**



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How has Burma's opening under a new government shaped the Kachin conflict?
2. What is the relation of China to the conflict in Kachin State? How has China both supported and worked against the interests of the KIA?
3. Why is the Chinese-backed Myitsone dam such a volatile issue in the Kachin conflict? How are pipelines and the Indian Ocean trade network system related to the conflict?
4. What is the significance of Hillary Clinton urging American businesses to invest in Burma?
5. What is life like for displaced Kachin people?
6. Based on *Blood and Gold*, develop a one-page, free-write analysis of the conflict in Kachin State. What are the major issues involved?



*There is optimism about the future, but it's not shared by the Kachin. Things there are getting worse.*

## ACTIVITIES

1. Have students research the Burmese monarchs Anawrahta, Bayinnaung, and Alaungpaya. When did they live? What are they credited with doing? How have narratives about them shaped contemporary Burmese cultural consciousness and national identity? How, if at all, are these kings linked with contemporary efforts by the government to control land and resources?
2. Have students research any one of the ethnic conflicts in Burma and compare and contrast it with the conflict depicted in *Blood and Gold*. How are they alike? How are they dissimilar? What are the implications of those similarities and differences for understanding the relations of politics, national identity, and environmental issues in Burma?

*What is the significance of the USA urging businesses to invest in Burma?*

*How do China's international developmental policies impact communities in places like Burma?*

3. Have students pick an ethnic group (Mon, Shan, Karen, Pa'O, Chin, Kachin, Wa, Naga, Rakhine, Lisu, Rohingya, etc.) in Burma and ask them to try to find information on their cultures and identities, from songs and language to rituals and daily practices.
4. Have students investigate how and why the Kachin and other ethnic minorities converted to Christianity, and why Christian missionaries had less success converting Burmese Buddhists.
5. Have students watch *Blood and Gold* in tandem with *Dams, Drugs, and Democracy*. Ask them to develop a robust set of reflections on the issues involved, based on the two documentaries.
6. Have students research the current status of China-related development projects in Burma, elsewhere in Southeast Asia, and in Africa. How do China's international developmental policies and efforts impact communities in these places?
7. Have students find as many sources as they can online about the history and use of the names Burma and Myanmar. Have them identify the complexities of the names. They could start with these links:
  - [an article from the BBC](#)
  - [a blog on the United States Institute of Peace](#)
  - [the Wikipedia page on the topic](#)
  - [an article in the Washington Post](#)



## SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

### Articles and updates related to the film

[“Burma in Transition”](#) – a background essay for the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting

[Background to the film](#) for Al Jazeera by director Jason Motlagh

[Everyday Kachin](#) – a photo repository of daily life among the Kachin people

2018 [update on the Kachin conflict](#) from the Associated Press

2019 [Human Rights Watch report](#)

2019 [update on Myitsone dam](#) from *The Diplomat*

2019–2020 [updates and related stories](#) on the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting website

2020 background article from the BBC: [“Myanmar Rohingya: What you need to know about the crisis”](#)

October 2017 report from the Asia Foundation: [“The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development.”](#)

This downloadable report contains a number of helpful figures and charts, including Figure 2.4, “Armed groups in Myanmar’s subnational conflicts (2016).”

### Books

Cockett, Richard. *Blood, Dreams and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015.

Holt, John Clifford. *Myanmar’s Buddhist-Muslim Crisis: Rohingya, Arakanese, and Burmese Narratives of Siege and Fear*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2019.

Lintner, Bertil. *Burma in Revolt: Opium and Insurgency Since 1948*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1999.

Sadan, Mandy. *War and Peace in the Borderlands of Myanmar: The Kachin Ceasefire, 1994–2011*. NIAS Studies in Asian Topics, no. 56. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2016.

Smith, Martin. *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnic Conflict*. *Politics in Contemporary Asia Series*, 2nd ed. New York: Zed Books, 1999.

Thawngmung, Ardeth Maung. *The “Other” Karen in Myanmar: Ethnic Minorities and the Struggle Without Arms*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012.