

Fire strikes an Akha village

By

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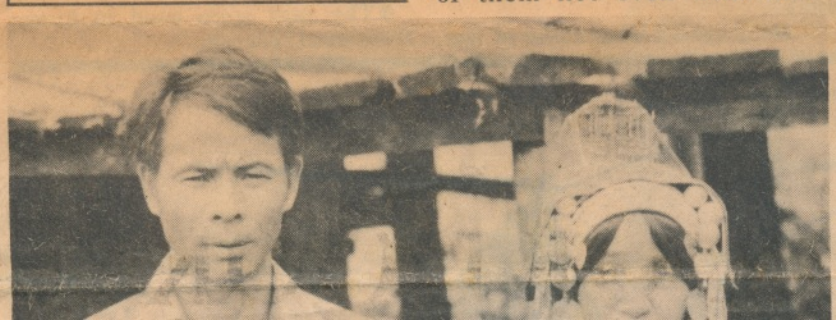
WHEN fire struck the small Akha village of Pabeu three months ago, it was in the middle of the night and all the inhabitants were sleeping. Caught by surprise, they rushed out of their houses — some of them not even with their clothes on — only to watch the inferno that deprived these already poor people of their few belongings.

When the sun rose over the misty hills and the smoke had dispersed, 11 out of 20 families had lost their homes, household utensils and domestic animals.

Satu Oyzeuko, a father of seven, had eight pigs and more than 20 chickens before the fire.

"I lost everything I had," says Satu with bitterness. "A relative of mine has now given me one pig and a chicken, which of course is better than nothing. But for a family as big as mine?"

Some of Satu's children are running around naked, curiously





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Lao Chu, headman of the village, with his wife.



Very few people were left untouched by the fire — not even the children.



But life goes on, and the Pabeu people can still raise an occasional laugh.

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Some of Satu's children are running around naked, curiously watching us as we sit on the floor in Satu's makeshift shelter, drinking tea and talking.

Pabeu village is located on a hilltop among bare mountains in Mae Chan District, Chiang Rai Province. Where there was jungle only a few years ago slash-and-burn farming has transformed these rolling hills into a barren scenery. The hazards of this type of cultivation was clearly demonstrated in Pabeu. The villagers had been clearing the forest to make corn fields the night before the fire occurred and, during the peak of the dry season as it was, it spread like a wildfire over the hills, the undervegetation burning like tinder.

The people now living at Pabeu moved to their new settlement from the nearby village of Pakor about 10 years ago to break new soil about two hours' walk away from the already overcrowded Pakor. In an administrative sense, however, Pabeu is still a sub-village of Pakor.

"We grow corn to make a living," Lao Chu — the legal phuyai bahn of Pakor — tells us. But most farmers don't want to go down to the market at Huei Krai along the Chiang Rai-Mae Sai Superhighway. They prefer to stay in the village and middlemen come to their homes to buy the crop. It is seldom enough and this year all the rice on two mountain fields have been destroyed by some kind of sickness. It is yellow and dry. Not good for eating. In Pabeu the situation is even worse. They have nothing at all.

A charity organisation in Chiang Mai has shown sympathy with the plight of the Pabeu Akha and donated such emergency relief as rice, blankets and plastic sheets to serve as temporary shelters until new houses are constructed. Despite this generous help, the Pabeu Akha are still suffering.

"First priority is rice and food," says Lao Chu. "Houses, blankets, cots, cooking utensils, buckets and so on come next. The villagers have no corn to sell and we are pleading with the townspeople for help."

When I visited Pabeu, reached after hours trekking on paths made slippery and treacherous by torrential rains, I was received as an honoured guest. One of the few remaining hens in the village was slaughtered and the villagers readily shared their dwindling supplies of rice with me.

The overwhelming feeling was that even when faced with such poverty and adversity of conditions, still the old traditions of hospitality in the hills survived. In return for this hospitality, I promised to publicise their plight and perhaps raise money in order to ease it.



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Rain adds to the misery of the Akhas in Pabeu village, many of whom still have not yet completed the reconstruction of their houses.



A mother and son in Pabeu village. She may have lost her home, but this Akha woman has managed to save her richly-decorated headwear.

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Satu Oyzeuko stands with part of his large family in his partially-finished house. He lost eight pigs and 20 chickens as well as his home when fire swept through the village.

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With seven children to look after, the future now looks bleak for Satu. He has been given one pig and one chicken, but that will not go very far.



Eleven out of 20 families lost their homes in the fire. The houses can be rebuilt fairly quickly, but the loss of animals and utensils is more serious.