

A War on the Streets of Bangkok

By Pira Sudham

"Go! Go!" the village chief commanded the crowd.

Seeing a little boy by his parents's sides, the chief coaxed, "Tanom and Jinda! Take your son with you. The boy will get half of an adult's pay. Have you ever touched a thousand-baht banknote before? An air-conditioned coach from Bangkok has arrived to take all of you there."

But the villagers did not move. It needed dexterity to convince the thick-headed peasants.

"It is a chance to make money so you can pay debts to the BAAC (Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives)," the big man proclaimed.

The claim worked.

Thousands of men, women and children had been convening at Ratchaprasong for such a long time that Tanin, Tanom's son, wanted to go home.

"We can't go yet," said the mother. "The work isn't finished."

The woman stressed the word 'work' to emphasize the importance of the assignment.

However, her son seemed so sad that Jinda needed to explain.

"We haven't been paid yet. How can we go? No money. No bus fare. When the work is done, they will let us go."

The boy looked sadder still, knowing that his classmates, who remained in the village, had sat the examinations. He, who was absent, would not be able to move up to Class Four the next academic year.

Tanin wept, thinking of Daeng, his puppy.

"Daeng is starving for sure," he mourned.

"It won't die of starvation," Jinda consoled her son. "It may go beg for food at the wat."

The mother could not say anything further, fearing that her vegetables at the lots by Lotus Swamp had all died.

In her hurry to get into the coach, Jinda forgot to ask Aunt Bua to do the watering in her absence.

"My poor spring onions, my poor corianders and dills," the woman silently mourned.

Meanwhile, Father Tanom remained silent though his mind's eye saw his dead caged dove. But then Tanom had always been taciturn. In all his life he hardly complained, enduring calamities, diseases and swindlers.

For instance, he and many other villagers subserviently worked one full day, cutting down indigenous trees in Changlai Forest to create a so-called 'new forest'. But the saplings provided by the officials to replace the felled trees turned out to be eucalyptus.

"We grew eucalyptus to make new forests to benefit the nation," the chief had explained.

The greatest loss in Tanom's life was being duped to pay the so-called 'Employment Abroad Agency' 150,000 baht in advance.

To be able to raise 150,000 baht, the victim had to borrow the money from a loan shark, using the title deed of his wife's rice-field as collateral.

When he landed in South Korea, it turned out that there was no one to meet him. No job. Nothing. Out of the deal, all he got was a passport and an air ticket. As a result, the loan shark took over the land.

The first urban warfare bursting out on the streets of Bangkok had happened. The gunfire, the bombing, the conflagration and the screaming of the people drove the hearts of the population in the battlefield into utter despair.

Hundreds of men, women and children were dead.

Tanom and Jinda fell on little Tanin, protecting him with their lifeless bodies.

Uncle Sa, who was still alive despite being shot, told Tanin to escape and seek protection at the nearby monastery, Wat Sabua.

"The monks there will protect you," Uncle Sa breathed his last breath.

At Wat Sabua, three monks stood still, barring several armed men from entering the chapel. However, the holy men could not prevent the hellish sounds from destroying the peace within the temple precinct.

Ten years later, a temple boy left Wat Sabua for the old battleground. There he stood at the spot where his parents had died.

Tanin trembled so much that he had to sit down. Eventually the fever forced the boy to lay on one side, wishing for the spirits of his parents to enfold him. Despite the fact that Ratchaprasong was completely deserted while the deadly virus was waging war on mankind, including monks at Wat Sabua, Tanin believed he heard the dreadful sounds of gunfire, of burning and the moaning of the wounded.

"Father Nom and Mother Da and little Daeng come to me now," the feverish boy tried to say.

The End