

VARIETY

TOTAL DENIAL

Film by Milena Kaneva

(Documentary – Italy/Bulgaria)

By RONNIE SCHEIB

An MK Production (in U.S.) release of an MK Production (Bulgaria) production. Produced, directed by Milena Kaneva.

With: Ka Hsaw Wa, Katie Redford, Dan Stormer, Daniel Petrocelli.
(English, Karen, Burmese dialogue)

Unfortunately, there is no dearth of human-rights violations in developing countries, sometimes with the tacit collusion of multinational conglomerates; rarely do these tales of terror have happy endings. For five years, Italo-Bulgarian helmer Milena Kaneva followed the story of 15 Burmese villagers who sued giant corporation Unocal in a California court and won an unprecedented settlement. Penetrating Burmese jungles with legendary young activist Ka Hsaw Wa as he gathers evidence of widespread forced relocations, murder, rape and slave labor, award-winning docu "Total Denial," which opened Oct. 26 in New York and Los Angeles, shuttles between outrage and justice.

Docu is a re-edited, lengthier and superior version of a 74-minute film that toured as part of the Human Rights Watch Festival in 2006. Pic concerned the building of the Yadana gas pipeline through Burma into Thailand and the unspeakable abuses committed by the Burmese military, which was given the task of providing "security" for the construction.

New version more fully incorporates the charismatic figure of Ka Hsaw Wa, giving a face and heroic backstory to the 15 plaintiffs who must remain unidentified to avoid reprisals, and also frames events within the larger picture of the Burmese struggle for democracy.

Ka Hsaw Wa has been hiding from the military junta since 1988, when he was arrested and tortured for three days. His journey from a student who aspired to become a rich businessman to a Third World David battling an American Goliath allows helmer Kaneva viewer-friendly exposition, particularly since Ka Hsaw Wa speaks English and is married to American activist Katie Redford (together, they co-founded Earth Rights, the organization that brought about the landmark lawsuit).

Interspersed throughout are scenes of Ka Hsaw Wa frolicking with his two young children when he's not trekking through burnt-out villages, ducking patrols with helmer Kaneva in tow and interviewing survivors of atrocities.

The brutality of the Burmese militia is matched only by the outrageously smug denials of Unocal's lawyer, Daniel Petrocelli (defender of Enron prexy Jeffrey Skilling). Not content to simply deny Unocal's accountability (the case was admissible only because of an obscure 18th-century statute, and the Bush administration put considerable pressure on the courts to dismiss the case), Petrocelli went on to accuse villagers of outright fabrication, all the while touting Unocal's humanitarian efforts in the region.

Tech credits are often raw but, given the clandestine, guerrilla-like nature of the footage, tend to add to the mystique.

Camera (color, DV), Kaneva; editors, Kaneva, Nina Altuparmakova; music, Nikolai Ivanov; sound, Vladislav Bojadjev, Kiril Petrushev, Blagomir Alexiev. Reviewed on DVD, New York, Oct. 23, 2007. Running time: 93 MIN.