

The Burmese Refugee Project

Update

**A quarterly newsletter for friends and donors
January-March 2003**

Education

Health

Development

STATS

- 30 Children enrolled in public Thai schools
- 16 Tested or advanced to 2nd or 3rd grade in first year
- All students received high marks
- Tutoring for new arrivals, older children 7 days per week
- 3 Latrines constructed
- 2 Children receive hospital care
- Vitamin A and vaccinations given to all children
- Deworming commenced for symptomatic community members
- Dental care given on a triage basis
- Skills training program planned
- Participatory model expanded, members express satisfaction
- Micro-loan program in the works

Children Excel in School, but Extra Tutoring Support Goes On

Two years of devoted teaching by Kaan seem to have paid off. One of our two dedicated project managers, he has taught the children for two hours per day in a hut with a dirt floor. Last June, he and Roj, our other manager, worked hard to enroll the children in formal Thai primary schools. As Thai schools are not known for lax curricula, we expected the children to mostly test into kindergarten and first grade, and to have a difficult time adjusting to the taunts of their Thai peers. Beyond the preparation they received from Kaan, they were also taught coping skills. When assigning the children to school, close friends were matched up. Children with family issues were sent to boarding school and received frequent visits from the project managers.

Of the thirty children who took placement exams in Thai schools, most of the kids tested above



kindergarten. Four tested into kindergarten, 14 tested into first grade. Three (Woot, Som Pong, and Mong) tested into first grade, but were moved to the third grade within 2 days, since their reading and writing skills were far ahead of their Thai peers. This is an amazing feat, especially since none of the children had any formal education. Two children who tested into first grade were promoted to second grade after the first month in school. As the year progressed, the students seemed to be coping well in their new environment.

Still, the real surprise came in December, when the children received their report cards. Almost all the students received an A for the first semester, and none of the students failed.

For new arrivals and older children not attending the public schools, Roj and Kaan have expanded lessons and tutoring from 5 to 7 days a week. They hope that this will prepare more children for

public school in the next school year, which will begin in June.

Mission Statement:

The Burmese Refugee Project is a non-profit organization seeking to build participatory models for community development. It focuses on education and the social welfare of Shan refugees living in Thailand. We believe that in building a well-educated, healthy, and economically robust Shan community, we are laying the foundations for a future democratic Burma. Our goals are:

To educate future participants in a democratic Burma.

To create a supportive, participatory, and prosperous community.

To provide social work to persons in need.

To preserve Shan cultural values among future political and community leaders.

To reclaim the rights of displaced peoples.

Birth Certificates or Bust

One of the greatest barriers facing children of Shan parents is the lack of a Thai birth certificate, which establishes residence. Few births previously occurred within the hospital, and few officials are willing to grant a certificate to Shan children with no official medical record. With the help of our project managers, 5 children born in Thailand were able to obtain their birth certificates. These children are now eligible for subsidized medical care.

Participation and Democracy

The BRP's mission has been participatory in more ways than one. In keeping with the world's ever quickening pace toward democracy,* we're always working to develop those projects and services that the people who benefit from them feel they need most. But we also ask the people to put in a little extra work. After a long day of hauling rocks from the nearby river, the refugees set to work building walls for their new latrines after selecting and purchasing the material for the walls. The refugees can now do their business in private.

Needs Assessed and Updated

The two project managers recently went to every Shan refugee household in the area and conducted interviews to measure the BRP's progress and to get a better idea of the community's needs. With this information, they can measure the extent of the families' financial needs and progress. They have also mapped the household clusters, so that they can better arrange tutoring and school groups amongst the children. Additionally, mapping helps them offer their help to new arrivals by making sure no one is left out, and helps them better plan next year's services.

During regular visits, they also regularly ask what the refugees have liked best about the project, and what they feel needs improvement. So far, the refugees have few complaints—though we still aren't sure whether this is politeness or genuine satisfaction.

Many of the community members have literate family members for the first time, and the children often help parents translate. Enthusiasm for the project is also strong because Roj and Kaan help the refugees gain legal rights for health and education purposes; this means that they can get coveted rights without getting into trouble with the government or meeting too much resistance from the local Thais.

Political Situation Along the Border Worsens

The political situation along the Burma-Thailand border has worsened greatly in the past 6 months. Although international human rights groups lauded the military junta's talks with democratic dissidents just last fall, conditions have once again deteriorated. Talks are at a standstill, new dissidents have become imprisoned, and news of mass forced relocation and violence arrives almost daily.

The official Burmese visit of Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin has not helped matters. The Thai government has in effect condoned the Burmese regime's egregious behavior, and it has begun to crack down on Burmese refugee NGOs and groups within Thailand. Many NGO workers have arrived at their offices only to find them closed; they have been told that they will not be allowed to resume work.

The Burmese Refugee Project has thankfully not been affected. It has received a larger-than-expected inflow of new arrivals since September, but social services have thus far been adequate. Members of

our community are, however, careful to discuss the need for birth certificates and legal rights within the framework of access to education and health services, for fear of retribution from the government.

*We can dream, can't we?

Help us make a difference:

The Burmese Refugee Project has no administrative and few overhead costs, so a little money goes a long way. With an annual budget of just over \$2,000, we have helped over a community of over 100 Shan refugees gain access to education, health, and legal services. Through this, we have lent them the resources to build their own community of support and dialogue.

Please help us in our mission by making a tax-deductible donation..

Donations can be made to:
Burmese Relief Center—USA
Peter and Celina's Project
1401 Woodlawn Park Dr.
Flint, MI 48503-2768

For more information about us, please visit:
www.pceo.org/BRP.htm