

The Burmese Refugee Project

Update

A quarterly newsletter for friends and donors
April-June 2003

NGOs feel political chill

The Thai government, whose Prime Minister has large personal financial investments in the Myanmar government, has responded to intensifying violence in Burma (see next story, "Political update") by clamping down on dissidents and refugees in Thailand. This round-up has struck several NGOs serving refugees in the area, whose financial flows have been checked without warrants. Our project remains fairly safe because of its small size and anonymity. In our project's small town, the staff has been especially careful to protect the identities of refugees they support, many of whom have experienced the growing xenophobia firsthand. They are also actively providing the community with counseling on mediation and stress management skills tailored to the politically charged environment.

Political update

The Burmese military dictatorship, SLORC (also known as the SPDC), abducted Burma's democracy leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi on May 31, setting off a political firestorm.

Ms. Suu Kyi's party, the National League of Democracy (NLD), won an internationally monitored election in 1990. Since then, NLD's members have been imprisoned and tortured, and Ms. Suu Kyi has endured long bouts of house arrest and imprisonment. Her steadfast stance won her the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.

Under continual pressure from the EU and the international community, SLORC granted the

NLD limited travel rights in early 2003. But SLORC quickly cracked down on the democratic movement again last month, attacking a large group of NLD members as they drove to a meeting, killing five pro-democracy leaders and re-arresting Ms. Suu Kyi.

While details of the attack remain vague, the international community responded quickly. Over the past month, the US, the EU, and Japan all quickly introduced legislation providing sanctions against the military dictatorship. In the US, the Senate has passed sanctions, and the House of Representatives has drafted similar legislation. Although slower to act, even ASEAN—a powerful coalition of Asian nations that set free trade standards—is starting to apply pressure on Burma. This, despite a "hands off" policy on the internal affairs of its member nations.

It is believed that Ms. Suu Kyi is being held in the notorious Insein Prison, where few survive for more than 3-4 years. There, prisoners are sometimes forced to live in a dark cell with 1 to 2 feet of water on the floor. Throughout the institution, prisoners are provided just two bowls of rice a day with a once weekly cube of meat. In one documented case, a prisoner, Bo Ou, was decapitated. His head was then used to make a stew for the other prisoners.

Despite this bad news, Ms. Suu Kyi is reportedly in good health, and SLORC's days may be numbered.

For more information, visit:
<http://www.dassk.com/>
<http://www.freeburmacoalition.org/>

Contact your representative at:
<http://www.house.gov/writerep/>



Churning out homework at the after-school program.

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.

Dealing with attrition

In Thailand, the school year starts in May. While last year was a stunning success, we are starting the year with 3 fewer students. One student, Thai, was sent to work in Bangkok. Her mother also pulled her sister from school. The third student, Am-Porn, moved to Chiang Mai with her family.

We are working with Thai and On's mother to bring them back into the school system. (These visits have worked in the past to encourage drop-out students to re-enroll.) These changes came as a surprise to our social workers, and we are working to head off such incidents in the future.

One strategy we have employed is to ensure that the community's basic needs are met, so that the children do not have to work. Even if rudimentary, all families have housing, and food is generally bought with pooled funds. We supplement the centralized food supplies when needed. Since community norms are pro-education, this has generally been enough to prevent attrition. We intend to specifically ask each family whether they have plans to remove children from school, and to explore why they feel this might be necessary. This will allow us to improve retention, identify where communication gaps exist, and better plan interventions.

Am-Porn, who moved to Chang Mai with her family, will also receive follow-up. Our social workers are planning to visit her family to help their transition into a new community. We are planning on funding her enrollment in a low-cost private institution if she cannot be placed in a public school. We expect a large increase in enrollment from new arrivals to the community this year.

Community profile: Sompong

Sompong is 11 years old and entering the 4th grade in a Thai

public school with two of his best friends from the Shan community, Woot and Mong. After attending the Project's informal school for two years, he attended a 'real' school for the first time last year. He received straight A's. Although Sompong sometimes stirs up mischief among his friends, he is also known for being incredibly respectful towards others, an especially admired trait in Theravada Buddhism (to which both Shan and Thai peoples subscribe). His most striking aspect, however, is the self-confidence he has developed since enrolling in BRP's programs.

Sompong was born in Thailand, in a local hospital, but he was not given a Thai birth certificate. Presently, the BRP social workers are working on his behalf to acquire the certificate. This would allow him to access health care and other citizenship rights much more easily. The appeal procedure involves payment of a tardiness fine, appointments with several offices, and documentation of proof. In the process, the BRP has been teaching Sompong's family basic advocacy skills, as well as means to document major events in their lives. The process has garnered both pragmatic and emotional rewards.

Sompong's father was gravely ill for several years before passing away, so his mother, Gom-Leur, has supported the family for a long time now. Although she has never attended school and is illiterate, Gom-Leur is articulate during her interactions with the BRP's social workers. She eloquently describes the hardships she suffers, as well as her strategies for coping. Still, she considers herself lucky, for she has procured a work permit that allows her to work for her Thai employers as a food vendor in the local market. With this permit, Gom-Leur escapes the more physically arduous refugee work, namely sharecropping and hauling rocks out of the riverbed. Her income is also more stable, and

at \$70 a month, almost as much as the average 2-person household income in the refugee community. Still, this is approximately 1/4 of the local Thai income, and her work permit has a renewable annual fee of over \$150.

Sompong and Gom-Leur live in a 1-room thatch-roof hut. They live in a cluster with 5 other families, with access to a shared outhouse toilet built with the BRP's help.



Sompong.

Martín-Baró funds BRP

We are indebted to the Ignacio Martín-Baró fund for Mental Health and Human Rights for their generous support. Their grant of \$2500 will provide us with an entire year of funding. We would also like to thank the numerous individuals who have made the BRP possible.

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 \$2,500, we help over 100 Shan refugees gain access to education, health, and legal services.

Tax-deductible 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