

# The Burmese Refugee Project

Update

A semi-annual newsletter for friends and donors  
Winter/ Spring 2004

## News galore

Greetings from northwest Thailand. Here's some of what's happened recently:

One of the four household clusters in which BRP children live was relocated a few months ago, when the landowner sold his property. The new owner kicked the refugee families off the land, and after some searching, all of the families have found new homes. (None of the families have found huts with more than one room, however.)

We are still trying to help those refugee children born in Thailand obtain birth certificates. Recently, the District Office informed BRP staff that it is illegal to help any unrelated person obtain legal documents. The BRP staff remain optimistic, however, since they are confident that they (and lawyers in general) are not doing anything illegal. District Office workers tend to have varying opinions on such matters, and repeated visits often prove fruitful. The experience, however, also exhibits the importance of confident cultural translators who can accompany the refugees, provide support, and lend legitimacy.



*Khong, 14, and Jab, 10, in their BRP-funded school uniforms.*

Another school year is coming a close in March, and the results are fabulous. Once again, most of the children are receiving straight As, and school lunches have provided them with a nutritional boost. One child grew 20 centimeters and gained 8 kilos in just the past year!

Not mentioned in these news beats are many personal news items—of houses burning down, separation, best friends moving back to Burma, new jobs, and for some families,

constant relocation because of fear of arrest by Thai police here or police/soldiers at home. Given these circumstances, the families' everyday lives are that much more poignant. The BRP social workers mostly act on such "everyday" issues, working and speaking with the families to create safe spaces, goals, future plans, and the security of education, health, and basic rights and services.

## Political update

The Thai government hosted the Bangkok "Road Map" process in December and January, in an attempt to elicit discussion between the Myanmar military junta and representatives of minority groups. The talks provoked divergent reactions among dissidents and NGOs. According to some groups, the SPDC junta representatives seemed open-minded. According to others, however, this round was just as scripted as previous ones: With just enough talk of democracy to appease the UN and monitors, but without substantial progress.

One reporter wrote, "For the most part the world has failed to respond to this atrocity. Following the leadership of Prime Minister Thaksin Sinawatra of Thailand... The prevailing opinion seems to be: What's a few crimes against humanity when business deals are at stake?" (Walson, [dictatorwatch.org](http://dictatorwatch.org), 10 Jan 4; see also our last newsletter's article on Thaksin and oil interests). Other groups and newspapers also criticized Thaksin and the UN for legitimizing the SPDC and therefore marginalizing Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition.

## Education as Top Priority

In our last newsletter, a story called "Dealing with Attrition" stated that Am-Porn moved to Chiang Mai with her family. Am-Porn's family has recently moved back, however, solely because they wanted Am-Porn to attend school, and they needed



the BRP's support in order to accomplish this. They gave up higher paying, easier jobs (sifting

sheets of paper into trash and recyclable piles) to do this.

We admire Am-Porn's parents' dedication to her education, and we will work with her family to ease the transition and maintain support.

Three new children have recently arrived from Burma. Without prompting from the BRP staff, the two older ones (San Liew, 4, and Sway Ni, 8) have already begun to learn Thai from the other refugee children, and they've requested help in enrolling in school when the new year begins in May. The 3<sup>rd</sup> girl, nicknamed UpSan Sawan, "Angel," is Sang Liew's baby sister.



*The new girls: Sway Ni, 8, UpSan Sawan, 4 months, and Sang Liew, 4.*

## 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.

**Community profile: Nuan**

Nuan is 11 years old and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Although Nuan did not witness war directly, she still suffered from the anti-minority policies in Burma. Her family was fearful and poor enough so that, at age 5, Nuan spent every day burning wood pieces into charcoal to sell.

*Nuan at the BRP New Year's Party,*



*holding her new book.*

This history has left in indelible mark on her, and she has remarkable enthusiasm and gratitude for the basic privileges of school, food, and leisure time. The staff say that, if anything, Nuan is “too polite” and reserved. Because of this, the BRP staff has focused on developing a relationship with Nuan based on trust, caring, and consistency—goals intended to show Nuan that some things do last and to instill a sense of worthiness and self confidence. The BRP staff note, “She is very kind—not like the other children are not kind—but Nuan, she will *always* share and give.”

At home, Nuan helps her family with chores such as tending to the boss’s cows and chickens. She enjoys playing checkers and movies. Still, most of her time with the BRP staff is spent talking—about her life, family, village, friends, and school.

Nuan’s mother died at an early age of “cancer.” We are not sure about this diagnosis because many families also describe cases of leprosy or gangrene as cancer. Although Nuan’s mother came from a prosperous family, Nuan’s father lost most of the family savings through drinking and gambling. He then abandoned the family and now lives in Chiang Mai with his new wife, providing no financial support. For a while, Nuan lived with her grandmother while in Burma, who also forced her to work rather than attend school. She now lives with her 25-year-old sister Ying and brother-in-law Yo. Although they love Nuan very much, they are themselves fairly young and expecting their first child in a few months. While they attend

to Nuan’s physical well-being, they are sometimes too overwhelmed to pay attention to her emotional health as well.

When she first arrived in Thailand two years ago, Nuan was placed in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade in a public boarding school a few kilometers from her home. This was done because she was living with Ying and Yo in a one-room hut at the time, and there was some tension due to lack of space and privacy. A year later, Ying and Yo were able to build a small cubby room for Nuan, so that she could have her own sleeping space. Nuan then began to attend a closer school, skipping the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade straight into 3<sup>rd</sup>.

Nuan’s three-person family turns to the BRP social workers first for guidance. When Ying and Yo considered separation, for instance, each member of the family approached the BRP staff for advice and counseling. Whenever there is conflict in the house, Nuan visits the staff for respite and support. Partly because of the BRP and your support, Nuan has a new family in Thailand, and says that she is happier here than anywhere else she has been

**New Year’s Party Pictures!**

The Burmese Refugee Project kids celebrated New Year’s with super spicy suki yaki (hot pot) noodle soup and ice cream popsicles.

These parties occur only once a year. (This is especially because many of the kids don’t remember their ages or birthdays.)

In addition to a good serving of nutritious food, each of the students received one randomly chosen book and one snack. A friend of the BRP staff, who works for a children’s publishing company in Bangkok, donated the books.

At the party, the children also got

the chance to play table tennis, play checkers, and watch a movie.



*Above, perusing the books; below, opening presents; bottom, lining up for noodle soup.*



**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](http://www.pceo.org/BRP.htm)

