

The **Burmese Refugee Project** Update

A semi-annual newsletter for friends and supporters
Summer/ Autumn 2006

News in Brief

We are pleased to announce that the **Sparkplug Foundation** has awarded a full-year's worth of funding. This grant covers BRP expenses through June 2007.

We have also received **fiscal sponsorship** from Doctors for Global Health (DGH, www.dghonline.org). Like the BRP, DGH is also committed to promoting international health, education, and human rights, especially via community development with local leaders. We're quite thrilled that we were able to find a fiscal sponsor with such similar ideals, strategies, and mission. Via DGH, we can also take credit card tax-deductible donations now, at our website (www.burmeserefugeeproject.org).

Looking ahead, we have received assistance from New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, to gain **non-profit status** ourselves. We have been placed with Kaye Scholer, LLP, and we are receiving pro bono services for our 501(c)3 incorporation.

As in the past, we are also indebted to important **individual donations**, and to the third-year support of our neediest cases sponsors.

The new school year has brought more changes than usual, as some children from the very first BRP cohort have now celebrated their **graduations from primary school**. A couple of the children have unfortunately not tested well enough to be placed in the academic secondary school. Although this is not unusual for the rural area in which the BRP operates, even among Thai natives, we are working with the children so that they receive alternative schooling. Since children in the newer cohorts were able to attend school from first grade on and continue to perform well, we are confident

that secondary school placement rates will rise dramatically.

To facilitate the transition to high school and beyond, we plan to engage Shan leaders in the Burmese Refugee Project. We hope that they can role model the benefits of high school and college education for the kids while teaching them about their culture and the role they might one day play in a democratic Burma.

Finally, we have two winners of the **second annual BRP essay contest**. It makes us proud that the children are not only growing to be literate and numerate, but also engaged, conscientious citizens: Among the issues addressed in the essays include environmental degradation, Buddhist culture, and the impact of the tourism industry on life in the nearby town. All entries were written by BRP children between the ages of 6 and 12.

In their own words

Here are some excerpts from the winning entries in this year's BRP essay contest, complete with illustrations:

Development and change in my village

When I was 7 or 8 years old, my village had a big forest. The houses were small but beautiful, and everything was cheap. There were not many cars on the street.

But 2 or 3 years ago, my village started to change in so many ways. The big forest had to be cut to build resorts. The small houses changed to big buildings, and now there are more cars on the street, and more accidents, also. So we get both good things and bad things from the change. The good thing is that we get more business and tourists. The bad thing is that there are fewer trees and more accidents.

--Little Pai, female, age 10

[The resorts are usually small

clusters of small luxury villas, but take up prominent space, and



bring a new class of high-end tourists, and a degree of income inequality, not seen in the province before. The village also has a 7-11 store on its two-block commercial strip now, and enough traffic so that the daily open air market has moved to a lot a five-minute walk away.- Ed.]

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.

Poy Sang Long (The novice)

Poy Sang Long is a Buddhist cultural festival from long ago. This year, I was a novice monk with many of my friends. I was a novice for many days, and at that time, I stayed at the temple and played with many of my friends. In the early morning, I went out to collect alms and receive food from the neighbors. The monk who looks over us walks in the front. If our bowls fall, then we have to run around the temple 30 times. One of my friends did not clean his bowl, so he could not come out to play with us that day.

--TaWorn, male, age 7

Political update

In early July, the Thai Ministry of Labor announced that the number of registered migrant workers in Thailand has dropped, as compared to the previous year. This does not necessarily mean that there are fewer refugees fleeing economic and sociopolitical strife in Burma, however. According to Burmese community organizations in Thailand, many potential registrants contend that their employers refuse to sponsor their work permits, even though all migrants pay for these permits themselves. Fewer work permits probably just means that workers are driven deeper into the informal sector, where wages are probably lower. Further, half of child laborers in Thailand are Burmese, and even if the number of adult migrant workers may have leveled off, the number of child workers has not. Such stories correspond with the testimonies of families in the BRP community.

In May, Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest expired, after which it was immediately renewed. More non-binding appeals for democratic talks took place, this time from Parliamentarians around the world, speaking via the United Nations. China and Russia did not support the non-binding, non-punitive rebuke of the Burmese military junta, and chose to abstain from the talks altogether. (China is a major importer of raw ore and energy from Burma.)

In April, after weeks of well-publicized mass protests in Bangkok (where Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra is less popular), Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej arranged a rare meeting with Thaksin, who then called for a snap election, which he promptly won, amid ballot inconsistencies and charges of corruption. Thaksin then stepped down, but his government remains in power, and the state of the Thai government remains in limbo.

Finally, in North American news, over 800 Karen Burmese refugees, all deemed "high priority" by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, have been granted asylum en masse by Canada, and are expected to relocate to that country in August. The case for Shan Burmese refugees remains vague, as both the Thai government and UNHCR have bestowed refugee status to fewer Shan than to members of other minority groups.

Community profile: Mong

Mong is a survivor. In the past couple of years, his father has passed away, his bamboo house has burned down, and the village he lived in was flooded (see the Winter/Spring 2006 *BRP Update*). For each of these challenges, Mong's family sought help from the BRP, for emergency materials, health counseling, and overall support. Mong currently lives with his mother, older sister, and older brother.

Mong's ultimate wish is to study as much as possible, and to someday attend college. This may be difficult, as Mong did not



Mong's future is less certain

test well enough on his secondary school placement exam to enter the academic high school. The overall placement rates in the village are somewhat low relative to more urban areas, but even if he had passed into high school, he would have had a good deal of ground to cover. Mong began school at age 9, skipping quickly from first grade to fifth grade, in a system with no means of helping immigrant learners.

Given these circumstances, Mong's accomplishments thus far should be commended, and the BRP staff are working to ensure that Mong continues his formal education somehow, even if via alternative schooling. In the meantime, Mong helps his whole family with their savings and negotiations with bureaucracies, helping them fill out forms and make household calculations; the skills he has acquired so far are already helping his entire family to survive.

Mong's favorite subject is Thai, and he could name no subject in school he did not like. The one in which he excels, he thinks, is art. For fun, he hangs out with his friend Sompong, also a neediest cases child at the BRP, and they sometimes go fishing. When asked what his favorite thing about the past year was, he stated that it was the fact that he has such a nice BRP sponsor.

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 \$3,700, we help over 100 Shan refugees gain access to education, health, and legal services.
Tax-deductible donations can be made to:
Doctors for Global Health
"Burmese Refugee Project"
in the check's memo section
228 East 13th Street #4
New York, NY 10003
For more information about us, please visit:
www.burmeserefugeeproject.org