

A semi-annual newsletter for friends and supporters  
 Summer/Fall 2007

**Political update: Burma**

There is exciting news coming from Burma (named Myanmar by the military junta). On August 15, the government raised prices on fuel five-fold. This resulted in increases in the cost of transporting food and people around the country. Many people in Burma are barely surviving on their meager income, so the price increases meant that thousands of people would starve. A number of students took to the streets to protest. These protests were violently suppressed, and the surviving students were either arrested or went into hiding.

In mid-September, a small group of monks took the up where the students left off. Monks are seen as holy figures by the ruling junta as well as most Burmese people. Though they have been violently repressed in the past, this repression can ignite further civilian unrest. Further, the junta leaders are themselves Buddhist. Repressing monks will certainly not help them reach nirvana.



Credit: European Press Photo, 2007.

Still, at the initial protest at the nation's most holy temple, some monks were severely beaten and shots were fired, but there were no reports of deaths.

The next week saw growing numbers of monks rising up and taking to the streets. All are refusing to take alms from government officials, a serious affront to their spiritual progression. The monks were largely allowed to move freely.

On September 22, a large group of monks appeared at the house of Nobel Laureate and opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. She has been under house arrest for 12 of the past 18 years. As the monks amassed, the security detail maintaining her house arrest turned aside, and they were able to visit the tearful Suu Kyi.

Since then, the protests have grown, with tens of thousands of monks

and nuns taking to the streets nationwide. This is undoubtedly the biggest movement toward democracy since the 1988 rallies. By Monday, September 24, there were over 100,000 protestors, including members of ethnic minorities and Burman lay people forming human chains to protect the clergy, in the former capital of Rangoon. As we go to press, prospects for change remain uncertain, as the junta has threatened to "take action" against the monks in future protests.



Credit: Associated Press, 2007.

One of the primary goals of the BRP is to build human capital via health and education. If democracy is one day restored to Burma, children from the BRP who return to Burma will number among the small handful of educated citizens in that country.

**New enrollees in high school**

Thirty-four of the BRP refugee children began a new school year in May. This year, we have 6 kindergarteners, as well as 6 sixth-graders (our biggest cohort yet), and our first secondary school pupils—Tankee, Pao, and Nuan have all passed the Mattayom (high school entrance) exam. Nuan receives some extra help in English and math from the BRP social workers after school, and all 3 seventh-graders report being very happy in their high school studies thus far.

The high school exam is sufficiently challenging to exclude a large number of Thai students. The BRP students, who often score at the top of their class, have had unusual success. However, some have failed in the past. One of the greatest remaining challenges is not to provide better tutoring and education, but to address social problems associated with poverty. One key push in this area has been

to survey for mental health problems among the students.

**Mental health survey results**

We compiled and tabulated our preliminary mental health surveys, and the results were striking. The survey asks the children to self-report (anonymously) whether certain statements are "not true," "somewhat true," or "certainly true." These statements include, for example, "I think before I do things" and "I have many fears; I am easily scared." Despite the fact that the children appear to play and study together, a significant percentage of the children reported that they do not have a good friend, and none of the children fully agreed with the statement, "Other people my age generally like me."

The children did also write that they had coping mechanisms for times when they felt angry or sad, including singing along to songs on the radio, reimagining the scenarios in their head, and meditation.

We used a well-tested survey instrument, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire already translated into Thai. This survey allows us to compare the BRP sample's results with those of

**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.

students in Thailand and internationally. According to these results, the BRP children in our first sample are close to average in terms of emotional difficulties, behavioral difficulties, and attentional difficulties; at some risk in terms of overall stress; and high risk regarding difficulties in getting along with other young people.

These sobering results add urgency to our current efforts to address mental health and psychosocial issues among the refugee community. We hope to gather more qualitative data, to compare the refugee community's results with Thai norms (it turns out that the Thai Ministry of Health is using the same survey for their efforts), and if possible, to conduct group therapy workshops and focus groups, in order to better ascertain the most pressing issues for the refugee children.

It is clear that mental health problems exist. One child has been arrested on drug charges, and a barely adolescent girl ran off with a much older neighbor. In both cases, the children's parents stated that they themselves did not know details of what happened. In addition to administering surveys to understand and plan for mental health needs, we also obtain complete life stories of each member in the community. Some of these stories are featured in our "in their own words" section and others in the "community profile" section of the newsletter.

**In their own words**

We wanted to share more excerpts from the children's essays, both old and recent ones. We found it interesting that the overwhelming majority of children describe their household budgets in detail; even the children's lives center around concerns about financial security.

We will start with an essay by Kam Loo (pictured below) who wrote his essay while in third grade.



*My parents were born in Burma, and they married in Thailand. They lived at Mok Jum Pae. They worked as farmers, and my father got 50 baht a day, and mother 30 to 40 baht a day. [There are approximately 32 baht to the dollar.]*

*When I was first born, my mother was sick, and I was always sick, too, when I was young. So I had to take a lot of medicine for three years. After that, I finally got better. My mother took me back to Burma. I remember the trip. We had to*

*change money, into Burmese currency. Burma is similar to Thailand, but there are fewer cars, so they use a lot of carts. Also, everything is a lot more expensive than in Thailand.*

*When we came back to Thailand, my father got 100 baht a day, and my mother 80 baht a day from their jobs. Sometimes, we can save some money, but my mother is sick now and cannot work, so we spend a lot of money.*

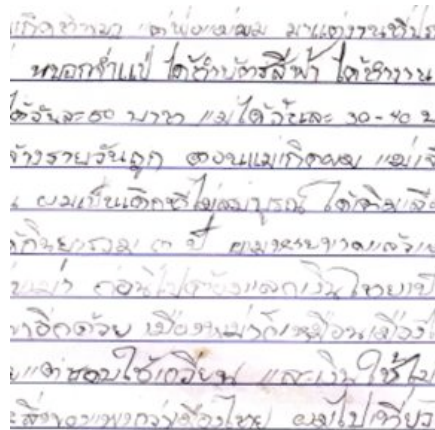
*When I was in the first grade, I got a little brother. I have to work hard, washing clothes and cooking. My father works hard, too, because we want money for the baby and my mother. I get 5 baht a day for school, or sometimes do not get any money. So, starting in second grade, I have to work on weekends...*

*I got sick in my appendix one day, and I stayed in the hospital in Maehongson. We spent 8,730 baht. We borrowed 5,000 baht from my father's brother, who lives there. [The BRP usually pays for emergency care, but this took place before he moved into the project.]*

*I study in the third grade now. Sometimes I work after school because the money from my father's job is not enough. We have to pay for food and to pay my father's brother back, but not as much now.*

*My mother is still sick. She cannot touch rain water. [According to local beliefs, going out in the rain exacerbates illness.] So my father keeps working, and I have to study.*

*Kam Loo hopes to study and help his family earn more money. Below, an excerpt of his essay.*



*I thank all the teachers who help me to study. I am determined to study and to help my parents.*

Of course, not all of the essays are about money. Big Ong, who suffered from cerebral malaria contracted in Burma, does not attend school because of her severe learning disabilities. Nevertheless, the BRP social workers have taught her basic literacy skills, and she enjoys reading lesson books with the community's first- and second-graders. She wrote the following about her family:

*I live with my mother. I do not have a father. [He died over a decade ago.] Only my mother understands me.*

*One day, I hope to have a father like the other kids. And I want to let my mother be happy all the time. I think I should work and take care of my mother.*

*Now, I have a dream, and my dream is to*

*see my father. And I want to let my mother be more comfortable, because she works every day to earn money for us. If she does not work on any day, then we have to borrow money from neighbors. I love and miss my father everyday.*

*Thank you for letting me tell you some things on my mind.*



*Big Ong holds hands with her mother.*

**Community profile: Ying**

Nuan, a BRP neediest cases sponsored child, has one family member in her life—Ying, her older sister. Now 25 or 26 years old (she is unsure), Ying is originally from Gut Kiaw, a town outside of Roi Rem, a city in Shan State in Burma.

She lived 6 to 7 kilometers outside of the city center, where her neighbors were mostly Shan/Tai Yai people like her. Some people in her town were South Asians from Burma's Arakan state. In her neighborhood, there were around 100 households, almost all of which she considered middle-class. They worked as rice and garlic farmers.

Although there were rarely Burmese soldiers in her immediate neighborhood, they were often in the surrounding areas. Ying says that there were many military junta training camps nearby, and that they often took villagers, especially those with indigenous "hilltribe" backgrounds, as forced laborers in the camp. Further, soldiers in the city center demanded 30% of all profits from crops sold in the market there. Although these were called "taxes," they were known to line the pockets of local soldiers. Ying had also heard that soldiers routinely raped women in villages closer to the border, such as those surrounding a town called Hua Muang.

When she was 15, Ying's mother passed away, and her father left the family and moved to another province. During the interview, Ying says that she had heard that Thailand had a benevolent King, that people lived in peace, and that they did not fear the ravages of civil war, as those in Burma did.

So Ying, at 15 or 16 years old, decided to give Thailand a try. She packed three outfits, dry food, and rice, and joined nine others from her village on a trek to Thailand. They first walked to Lankur, a border city on the Burmese side. This took one day. They then walked for 6 days through the jungle. At some point during their journey, Ying ran into Thai soldiers, who did not ask her for an ID. At the time, Thai soldiers were a lot less strict about Burmese refugees coming into the country. In fact, they even gave her rice to help her along the way.

Eventually, Ying's group stumbled upon a village of Lisu (indigenous hilltribe) people in Thailand. She was not sure whether she really was in Thailand, however, because the Lisu people did not look Thai to

her, and because they spoke Shan. There, Ying and her fellow migrants worked for 5 to 6 days for money. Each earned around 500 baht (approximately \$12). Before working for the Lisu (who are themselves considered a poor ethnic group within Thailand), Ying only had 500 Burmese jaht, or approximately 70 cents, with her.

Eventually, Ying found work at a restaurant in Maehongson Province and worked there long enough to garner an annual, renewable working permit. Less than a year later, she met Yo, another Shan migrant who had been living in Thailand for quite a while. They married and moved to his boss's garden.

Ying states that life in Thailand is harder than what she had anticipated. Back in her Burmese village, she had heard of people moving to Thailand, where work was plentiful. When these came back to visit, "they looked like rich



*Family portrait: Nuan, Ying, and Ying's two-year-old son.*

people, and could buy bicycles or materials for a new house." She notes that these people never told the villagers what kinds of jobs they held in Thailand, nor that so

many worked as indentured servants there. Nevertheless, she notes that life is a bit more secure in Thailand. She does not feel as fearful of Thai soldiers or immigrant officials as she does of the military junta, and the prices of basic goods are not as volatile. If they are lucky, Ying states, her two-year-old son will not experience the vulnerability or fear she did growing up.

### **Subtle changes in working permits and visas**

During the past few months, BRP community refugees with working permits have been receiving new mandatory identity cards, which look a lot more like those Thai nationals hold. Some of the refugees hope that these new cards help them establish their residency in Thailand, and because the cards are more difficult to counterfeit, that they help the refugees be less

vulnerable to police harassment than before. These visas are one step in the right direction. However, recent changes in the political situation in Thailand have not helped refugee and immigrant populations as much as hoped; mass deportations are still the norm.

### **Political update: Thailand**

In Thailand, the transition military government won a referendum on its proposed constitution, with around 70% of the popular vote. This new permanent constitution was officially implemented on August 24. While it gives more rights to ethnic minorities, some critics assert that it is less democratic than Thailand's 1997 constitution because the new Senate is only partly elected.

In the meantime, deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra remains in exile in England, where he recently bought the Manchester City Premier League team, via a £81.6 (\$165 million) takeover of 75% of the team's shares. Mr. Thaksin is one of the 500 wealthiest men in the world.

### **Deep gratitude to our generous supporters & friends**

We have received another generous anonymous donation, one that supports a full year of work at the BRP. We have incorporated the BRP, and we are about to receive our non-profit tax status from the IRS.

Many thanks to all of our donors, to Doctors for Global Health, and to Graham Pechenik of Kaye Scholer LLP.

### **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 \$3,900, we help over 140 Shan refugees gain access to education, health, and legal services.

Tax-deductible donations can be made via credit card at our website, or via checks made out to:

Doctors for Global Health  
 "Burmese Refugee Project"  
 in the check's memo section  
 228 East 13<sup>th</sup> Street #4  
 New York, NY 10003

For more information about us, please visit:

[www.burmeserefugeeproject.org](http://www.burmeserefugeeproject.org)