

The Burmese Refugee Project

Update

A semi-annual newsletter for friends and donors
Summer/ Autumn 2005

News in Brief

We are pleased to announce that the **Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights has renewed BRP funding**. This third- and final grant from the Fund covers BRP expenses through June 2006.



Upsan Sawang and her mother

We are so indebted to important **donations from individuals**, and to the second-year support of our **neediest cases sponsors**. These sponsors have also been sending letters to the children, which has been met with great excitement.

The BRP kids are moving along in school, and recently began a **new school year**. One of the older children to have enrolled in school, Yoon, is now in the seventh grade! Soon enough we will see children pass through high school, and hopefully onto college.

We have been collecting a whole lot of **children's essays**, and have two winners of the BRP essay contest. Amporn and Kamloo won in the younger and older categories, respectively. (See last news item.) We are also in the process of sifting through **our health data**. We are currently conducting statistical analyses on four years of height and weight data, comparing the progress of BRP children to normal range growth levels in Thailand.

Political update

On July 6, the Burmese military junta released over 240 of around 1,300 known political prisoners in Burma. These are reported to include several senior members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), and primary opposition group led by Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as 75-year-old Win Tin, who has been honored with the World Association of Newspapers 2001 Golden Pen of Freedom, as well as the 2001 UNESCO Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize. Amnesty International had called for his immediate release just two days earlier, in a campaign marking the 16th anniversary of his imprisonment.

The news is being met with cautious celebration, especially by the families of the released. Critics, however, remain wary because they view the July 6th event as just one component of larger political developments in

anticipation of the economic Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), proceedings next year. That is when the military junta from Burma is set to assume chairmanship of ASEAN, and to host the organization's proceedings.

Several Asian countries have appealed to the military junta to introduce democratic reforms and address its human rights record before hosting the ASEAN proceedings. The United States and European countries are also expected to boycott the proceedings. Critics urge that the junta release all political prisoners and allow meetings of the NLD to take place.

In other political news, the Chinese company CNOOC and Chevron are bidding to take over the oil company UNOCAL (as of 7/7/5). UNOCAL is the American oil company that has knowingly used forced labor, captured by military junta soldiers, to build pipelines through Burma. As reported in the last newsletter, UNOCAL has been forced to pay compensation for its actions in a 2004 settlement.

The current bid war has been solely framed in terms of impending Chinese economic domination of US interests in the mainstream news. In a human rights context, China's potential takeover is worrisome because CNOOC is operated by the Chinese government, the military junta's greatest and most powerful ally. If CNOOC wins the bid, it will be more difficult to hold UNOCAL accountable for human rights violations.

Finally, Muslim-Buddhist strife in the south of Thailand, specifically in Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat provinces, has escalated over the past few months. Yala province is a former sultanate of Malaysia, and it

is one of the few in Thailand that is not overwhelmingly Buddhist. Separatist sentiments have been at least partly fueled by government-sanctioned violence and discrimination against Muslims. (After demonstrations last year, 78 men perished in a truck en route to jail; the Thai Prime Minister blamed the deaths on the men's day-fasting observance of Ramadan.)

Unfortunately, horrific violence has intensified, and so have the responses. Over 880 people have been killed in the past 19 months. Dozens of schools have been burned down since May, and schoolteachers now carry firearms to and from work. Almost 3,000 teachers have been transferred out of three southernmost provinces, and over 35,000 people have moved away between January and June of this year (*Irrawaddy news*, 7/5/5). Economic activity is also suffering.

Fortunately, the BRP appears to be distanced from the violence in the south, and Thai-Muslim strife has not translated into tensions between Thais and indigenous hilltribes or Burmese refugees in the north. Nevertheless, human rights groups fear a rise in Thai ethnic nationalism.

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: Artit

Artit doesn't know his exact age, nor his birthday. All he knows is that he was born on a Sunday in September—His name, after all, translates into "Sunday." He has lived in Thailand for most of his life. His mother and father separated years ago. Presently, he lives with his mother and her boyfriend in one of the BRP household clusters. His mother and her boyfriend have a daughter who is now 4 or 5, but Artit has not seen his half-sister in years, because they had trouble getting her back into Thailand the last time they visited family in Burma.

In March of this year, Artit's father was killed in a duel in the jungle. The circumstances surrounding this event remain vague. Artit's father previously lived with his girlfriend in a village approximately 100 kilometers away. Although Artit rarely got to see his father, BRP staff report that Artit appeared to be grieving and depressed throughout March and April. The two BRP social workers are providing counseling to the family, and have offered emergency help if needed.

Artit's mother traveled south to investigate the circumstances of her former partner's death. Luckily for Artit, he has a cousin to stay with in the meantime—Sompong, who was the subject of the community profile in the Summer 2003 newsletter.

When we last met with him in January, Artit told us that, as soon as he learned that he had received sponsorship, he went home to tell his mother. She said that with such a 'scholarship,' he could study as much as he wants, and go as far as he possibly can. This meshes well with what Artit envisions for himself; to possibly even attend university. This is astounding and wonderful in a community where, as stated earlier, only one or two mothers have any schooling, and all but a few fathers have attended more than three or four years of school. It also exemplifies the high level of trust established between Artit's family and the BRP, given that these families are rightfully wary and suspicious of many institutions and organizations. This achievement is made all the more poignant by the fact that at one point, three years ago, Artit's mother had pulled him out of



school, stating that she feared retribution from Thais. With help from fellow BRP community families and from the staff social workers, Artit and his mother have not only addressed the obstacles blocking his education, they have thrived while doing so.

Like the other BRP children, Artit is exceedingly polite and always obliging in his demeanor. This is behavior that is well appreciated in Thai society. At school, he consistently receives straight As. This past year, he placed first in his entire grade at school. He always helps his mother in the home, washing dishes and performing household chores. Like most of the children in the BRP community, he also works in the fields during his summer vacation, and sometimes on weekends. He has also served as a novice monk, earning merit for his family in both Shan Burmese and Thai cultures. As a reward, Artit looks forward to opportunities to eat his favorite meal, *moogathai*, a Thai meal similar to *sukiyaki*, except that it involves a shared grill in addition to a broth pot. In his spare time, Artit's favorite hobbies are soccer, table tennis, and *paetong*, a local game akin to Italian bocce.

Back in January, Artit could not name any specific bad thing or event from his past year, despite the fact that his house burned down the week before our interview for this profile, and he lost all of his schoolbooks and clothes. (Luckily, no one was home at the time.) Artit declares that his performance in school was the best thing that happened to him in the past year. He says that he has done fairly well in the past, but never placed above third or fourth in his class, so he feels as if he is improving in school.

In their own words

Over the past couple of months, many of the BRP children, namely those aged 7 to 12, have been interviewing their parents, practicing their writing skills, and telling their life stories on paper. This BRP activity was designed to open a dialog between the children and their parents surrounding their immigrant history and the family's past.

The key motifs from the short essays appear to be family and

money—even the seven-year-olds list their parents' exact wages.



Jab, Sang Lieo, and TaWorn

We will be sharing other essays in upcoming newsletters, but here are some excerpts:

"We did not have work in Burma, so we moved to Thailand. The ticket was expensive, about 3,000 baht per person.

We did not have much money, so we walked. It took a few days to get to the border, and we walked one more day, and then we took a bus."—Pao, female, age 11

"When we lived in Burma, we were poor, and life was difficult because of the war. It was hard to grow plants, because there was not enough water, and the products weren't good... So we moved to Thailand. Me, I'm very happy to live in Thailand.

When we moved to Thailand, I was about 11 months old. My father held me all the way. Because of this, my older brother thinks that my father only loves me, and does not love him.

When we got to this village, we stayed in the old hut for one month. After that, we built our own hut. First, some people took me to study at the Double Rainbow School [an informal school founded by the BRP social workers]. In the beginning, I was very shy. But the teachers helped me until I felt better. And when that school got closed, the teacher brought me to the public school. Good-bye."—Kurr, male, age 10

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
228 East 13th Street #4
New York, NY 10003

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