

The Burmese Refugee Project

Update

A semi-annual newsletter for friends and donors
Winter/ Spring 2005

The BRP Beat: *Sabaidi Bi Mye*

Happy New Year! Once again, the BRP administrators' winter visit was filled with evaluations of past initiatives, ideas for new ones, and general news.

It feels like each newsletter comes with news of **school achievements** that are hard to top, and this one is no exception. At one of the local schools, BRP kids took the top four places in the second-grade class! In first, second, third, and fifth place were KamLoo, Kurr, Khong, and Jab. This show of excellence is especially remarkable considering the fact that many of these four students' fellow classmates are middle-class Thais. As our 3rd year of official public school enrollment comes to a close in March, there are BRP children excelling in every grade from kindergarten to 6th grade (except 5th).

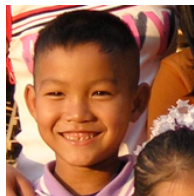
Over the past year, many of the children have been writing thank-you letters to sponsors, and others have been writing **essays about their dreams, future goals, and**

families. These activities have helped the children with build

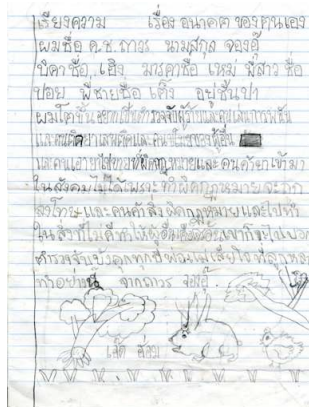
positive visions for themselves in the future. Even the youngest ones have written incredibly moving pieces that, albeit short, reveal the dramatic ways in which these children have been forced to prioritize their desires and confront Thai stereotypes of Shan people. 5-year-old TaWorn, for example, wrote about how he wants to catch the

“criminals and gamblers... thieves, and the people who sell drugs” when he grows up, even though “their parents will be sad they were put away.” Despite Thai media's constant focus on Shan people only as drug traffickers, these children envision anything but marginalized roles for themselves in society.

In a new initiative aimed at addressing adult and child mental health issues, **children have been conducting interviews of their parents, aunts, grandparents, and other adults**. The interviews concern life in Burma, Shan traditions, what led the family to from Burma, what the journey to Burma was like, and how Burma has changed since they first moved (since some of the parents attempt to go back home once every few years). This initiative overtly addresses issues of political persecution, cultural preservation,



TaWorn, 5 & his essay on his future goals (below).



intergenerational conversations about life changes, family traumas, and coping

mechanisms. Best of all, the

histories and interviews written by the children are not forced onto the community or executed as compartmentalized activities. Far from it, the children take it upon themselves

to illustrate the stories, express them-selves and their families' struggles creatively, and engage in new dialogues. By documenting each family's collective experiences with forced relocation adaptation, cultural displacement, and discrimination, the children learn of the importance of their heritage through their parents' struggles. The parents in turn further explore the meaning of their own personal hardship and reflect on how much they and their children have faced and conquered in Thailand.

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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, & 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.



Above field visit medical consultations with BRP families; below, BRP children with sponsors gather for an exciting round of bookkeeping.



“Beat,” contd from p. 1

This also presents an opportunity for our project social workers, who have discussed these issues with many families in the community, but have not had the opportunity to explore what this has meant to the children.

In another initiative, the BRP children and parents perform bookkeeping duties alongside staff. This builds math skills among the parents, teaches children the basics of asset management, and builds transparency in the project. The children who have personal sponsors keep tabs on the cost of their school uniforms, books, and transportation costs on a monthly basis. One major challenge facing the project is the falling US dollar. The generous donations of our sponsors are worth nearly 25% less than they were four years ago. While a dollar still goes very far in Thailand, the future is less certain. In order to build financial

sustainability, BRP has launched an endowment campaign. Our goal is to raise \$30,000; thereafter, interest alone could fund the project in perpetuity!

Finally, in **other news**, the BRP continues to enroll new arrivals in school. In one household cluster in particular, 7 children have recently arrived. In another household cluster, a new latrine was built, lending sanitation access to several more families. With a combination of BRP project coordinator medical consultations, social worker-facilitated legal advice, and better infrastructure, many of the refugees are also gaining access to better medical care. Ong, for example, was purported to have a

learning disability. Last year, she was diagnosed with malaria she had probably been carrying for years; after treatment, her speaking and cognitive skills improved dramatically. Unfortunately, some aspects of BRP families’ everyday lives remain precarious. For instance, Artit’s hut burned down in December, and he lost his school uniform, books, and his few street clothes. He is a promising student, but he couldn’t attend school without a uniform and had no place to study. Project social workers rushed to quickly get him back to school, and the family’s employer helped rebuild the hut. Without the help of the BRP, he might have missed a semester of school as his family scrambled to save for new materials.

Political News Brief

In the past six months, a ‘moderate’ in the Myanmar military junta was forced to resign, and despite more

promises to release political prisoners, Aung Saw Suu Kyi remains under house arrest.

While the political situation within Burma remains sober, images from the tsunami disaster brought new grief to the entire region. While the official casualty tolls in Burma are low, the actual numbers are almost certainly much higher; fisherman have said that many seasonal fishing villages were completely wiped out, leaving hardly any survivors to tell the tale. In southern Thailand, many Burmese refugees lost their work documents, many were rounded up for manufactured charges of looting, and the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma expects approximately 2,000 to be deported. As a result, many refugees are fearful of seeking aid and remain in hiding. One indirect effect is donor fatigue as attention is drawn away from the day-to-day realities of life under military rule. Fortunately, none of the families we work with were affected by these events and our donors remain resolute.

Still, some good news came all the way from California, where a lawsuit used the 1789 Alien Torts Claim Act to assert that UNOCAL Corporation knowingly assisted the Myanmar (Burma) military in human rights abuses during construction of its pipeline there. As a result, Burmese victims of forced relocation, forced labor, and rape, represented by EarthRights International, will receive long-term compensation from UNOCAL, as per a December 2004 settlement.

Community Profile: Kampai

Kampai’s mother died of AIDS when she was very young. Although her father took care of Kampai briefly while in Thailand, he soon abandoned her and went back to Burma.

Contd. on p. 3

“Profile,” contd. from p. 2

Left orphaned, Kampai, now age 12, first lived with her aunt, then her grandmother. She is continually shuffled back and forth between these two relatives, and she presently lives with her aunt, a single mother with a young daughter of her own. Like Kampai’s grandmother, she states that she would rather have Kampai work than attend school. Kampai herself loves school, and she would like to study for as long as she possibly can. BRP social workers meet with the family frequently to discuss different options, and thus far, Kampai remains in school and is now completing grade three.



Some of the differences in vision stem from the fact that no one in Kampai’s family has ever attended school, and they are not familiar with institutional norms. For instance, Kampai’s aunt states that even if she pulls Kampai out of school for one semester, she might let Kampai go back to school the next semester, not understanding that this would prevent her from keeping up with her classmates. Further, Kampai’s aunt sometimes states that even if Kampai’s earning wages will be higher with each level of completed schooling, she would like Kampai to be earning wages and helping out the household now.

Unfortunately, this decision is all the harsher given the fact that Kampai is one of the BRP’s seven children sponsored by individual donors, so that all of her schooling-related expenses, as well as most of her other everyday expenses, including clothing, are already paid for. In addition, like many other children in the BRP community, Kampai earns money on some weekends and during summer vacations by harvesting garlic in the fields. Still, it should be noted that

overall, Kampai views her home life as normal. While she performs household chores, for example, she does not have to work inordinately more than other BRP children.

In the face of such adversity, Kampai’s resolve to complete middle school (which students must test into), attend secondary school, and possibly even attend university is that much more poignant. Emotional and financial support from the staff social workers and her peers is integral to building some self-esteem and her continuing success. Her favorite subject in school is English. She often goes to the library to read books in her spare time. Her favorite ones are tales about animals. [Also, since her school library has no books in English, we are sending her early reading books.]

According to Kampai, the best thing that happened to her this past year is getting good grades. She does have time to ponder some things besides school and books, however; Kampai loves to eat and is decidedly *not* finicky. She likes to eat everything— except, that is, fermented fish.

New Year’s Party

The Burmese Refugee Project continued the annual tradition of throwing a New Year’s Party for the kids. This year, the children were treated to *lard na*, a dish filled Chinese kale, fish balls, and pork in a gravy with freshly made noodles. As a bonus, the children also received ice cream sandwiches straight from the ice cream man, who announced his arrival at the party with music blaring from his cart’s boom box. Each of the 40 or so attendees received a sandwich with two scoops of ice cream placed in a hot dog bun. While the special delivery set the project back a total of 200 baht (a little more than \$5 for

37 children and 4 adults), we haven’t heard any complaints from our sponsors.

As usual, the children savored their *lard na*—until they realized that the gift-receiving would only begin after they finished their meals. With that, the children lined up to wash their dishes as quickly as possible and drew numbers from a bowl. Each number was randomly attached to a present, which included small stuffed animal dolls, crayon sets, and snacks.



The ice cream man arrives.

Funders Sustain Support

We are indebted to the Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights for their generous support, and to the numerous individuals who have made the BRP possible, including the longer-term Sponsors of BRP’s neediest cases.

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 \$3,800, we help over 120 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:

<http://www.pceo.org/BRP.htm>