

Projects to Support Refugees from Burma

Trip Report, 2008

PSRB President Sally Steen visited the Thai-Burma border between 18/01/08 - 27/01/08. Most PSRB projects are inside the refugees camps; the visit also took in Mae Hong Son, and Mae Sot and meetings in Chiang Mae and Bangkok.

BURMA - BRIEF OVERVIEW

Still led by Senior General Than Shwe, Burma's military junta remains as intransigent as ever - despite the succession of urgent resolutions by governments and others around the world.

A referendum is planned on the new Constitution for May 2008. But, typically for the Alice in Wonderland politics of Burma, it has not been revealed what exactly people will be voting about, or whether there is any good reason to be hopeful about promised elections in 2010. The auguries are not good, including a refusal to lift the ban on the leader of the National League for Democracy Aung San Suu Kyii from taking part.

The assassination of the General-Secretary of the Karen National Union, Padoh Mahn Sha Lah Phan, on February 14 this year has been a particular setback for the Karen and, argues Benedict Rogers of Christian Solidarity Worldwide "for the entire movement for democracy in Burma." He sees the planned votes as nothing more than "a blatant attempt to rubber-stamp military rule".

It is a government which in 2006, decided to remove itself 300 miles from Rangoon, and its tenebrous isolation parallels that of the whole country. The global publicity for the "Saffron revolution" by monks in September last year has faded now, in part because owning a mobile phone or a satellite dish has now become so exorbitantly expensive that these are luxuries for the rich. Since also email contact is very limited, and the price of international phone calls is out of the reach of most people, contact has effectively been cut. Many monks have not been seen again since their arrest, and there is a grim awareness that the generals would not shy away from cracking down again, if necessary. The UN special adviser Ibrahim Gambari has now made three visits since September, and on his most recent was publicly insulted.

The need inside Burma remains unquestionable. A third of the children live below the poverty line in a once-rich country which has been plundered by its incompetent rulers; at a time of boom in Asia, this remains one of the poorest places in the world. People are forced to work for little in neighbouring countries as migrant labour, often being harshly treated. For the first time there are reports of boat people from Burma.

INSIDE KAREN AND KARENNI STATES

The Free Burma Rangers, a group based in Chiang Mae who are among the few to reach the internally displaced and deliver food, medicine, and other supplies, is now become one of most reliable sources of information on these areas, reporting that hundreds of people have been killed and more than 30,000 villagers in northern Karen State driven from their homes in 2006 and early 2007. This month so far over 2,000 have been made homeless.

"The Burma Army has significantly expanded its military infrastructure," said one recent Rangers despatch, "replacing the villages and farms cleared during the offensive with a growing web of army camps and roads. The re-supply of these camps is now in its final stages, and the yearly improvement of the previously existing roads has now been completed."

They claim there are now over 63 battalions in the three northern districts of Toungoo, Papun. and Nyaunglebin: "With Burma Army camps now well-supplied and roads improved, villagers and those displaced remain constantly prepared for renewed attacks."

Those who have reached the refugee camps on the Thai side of the border have walked for days through mountainous terrain, braving landmines and Burmese soldiers with orders to shoot on sight, and finally crossing the wide River Salween. Once in safety they receive only the bare necessities to survive. Thanks to your support, PSRB is able to provide some extra help. I cannot begin to describe to you how appreciative people are that they are not simply forgotten.

THE CAMPS AND RESETTLEMENT

The Thai-Burma Border Consortium, which supplies food, and other essentials in the camps, is facing an unprecedented budget shortfall for 2007/8 of €3.5 million, in part because of the collapse of the dollar.

"The impact on refugees will be drastic," the TBBC says. "Food rations will fall and shelter needs will remain unmet. For an already stressed population, this will bring nutrition standards to a level below international standards."

Meanwhile resettlement has continued during 2007/8 and many now find themselves in the US, Australia, the UK, or Finland among other destinations. Their reception in these countries and preparation for a new life there have had mixed success.

Some who go are illiterate, and have not succeeded in learning much of the new language before they go. US officials visiting the camps are said to have urged people to go to the US, promising that even if they can just say their name they can find work. This has, alas, not proved to be the case.

Desperate phone calls from places such as Connecticut concern the pitfalls of modern urban life; the Karen and Karenni, especially, are extremely conservative. But people settling in Britain seem on the whole to have been happy. Many are in Sheffield and receiving placements for initial job experience; teachers, for example, help out at primary schools and report their satisfaction.

But evidently the exodus of some of the most talented and competent has badly affected the running of the camps, and resulted in a woeful shortage of teachers and medics. Schools, clinics, and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) are all in crisis.

One of the many knock-on effects has been for PSRB, as those who help to implement the projects have often left, or are considering leaving. Impossible to criticise them for wanting to have a future, but hard too not to admire the sacrifice of those in leadership positions who have chosen to stay with their people.

ENDGAME?

The exodus coincides with the end of half a century of struggle against the regime in Rangoon. The remaining Karen and Karenni resistance, at most 4,000 men, is increasingly divided, and faces a standing army of 400,000. Things are hopelessly unequal.

In truth, brute force, blackmail, and bribery have all but triumphed over a noble cause. The Karen and Karenni now hold very little territory, and the well-equipped Burmese army - with Chinese help - has hugely escalated a military offensive of unspeakable ferocity and cruelty.

Those involved now speak of the "endgame" for the armed opposition of the Karen National Union. The great moral and practical question is how many more lives - so many thousands have died already - are worth sacrificing to a struggle which is now all but hopeless?

WHAT NEXT?

Numbers in the camps continue to grow, but unofficially. Those who are unregistered cannot apply for resettlement, nor are they eligible to receive food; outside the camps over two million migrant workers labour in Thailand for rock-bottom wages; it is in reality difficult to draw a clear line between refugees and migrant workers. We can do little to change all this, or the politics which have created this dreadful situation. But we can and should, I believe, continue to play our small part in helping to relieve suffering, and to bear witness to what is happening to this tragic people.

Mae Hong Son

The Karenni Bible College Camp 2

I met representatives from the Bible College on January 20 at their office in Mae Hong Son, set up with funds raised through PSRB (which has supported the college since 2002). There are 24 students and six staff.

The College is in Karenni Camp 2 (pop 4,000), where the Thai authorities have decreed that it should be impossible to connect with the Internet, and mobile

phones do not function; this may give some idea of how inhospitable Thailand seeks to make this human warehouse.

Access for outsiders has been tightened up each year, and representatives from the College who made the five-hour journey to meet me risked being picked up and fined, or worse, being sent back into Burma.

The Bible College depends on the Karen Baptist Convention in Rangoon for staff and teaching materials. Visiting teachers are not allowed in Camp 2, and people from the Bible College are not allowed to visit the college in Rangoon. Despite the difficulties the people I met were without exception hopeful and kind.

I asked how resettlement had affected the College and was told some of their graduates had left for third countries, from where they were fundraising for the College.

The Bible College students pay special attention to old people in the camp, at Christmas holding a celebration for the over- 70s, and students regularly do pastoral visits to the elderly and the sick; common health problems are high blood pressure and some TB and diabetes.

Hopes for future

Staff and students hope to obtain a more powerful generator at the College to enable them to run more sophisticated music software on their computers. They also hope for a teacher for computer studies and music. Their instruments are getting old. They would like new ones. This might attract a teacher.

In March 2010 the Bible College will celebrate its 10th anniversary and invite lots of people. They will need the permission of the Thai authorities.

Finance

During 2007 3,152 €. was donated to the College through PSRB. This has been used to pay staff 10.20 € and students 0.75c per month; to buy four computers, and to set up the office in Mae Hong Son.

PSRB donation 245 €

Ethnic Migrant Family Society

A representative of the above organisation, explained to me that elderly former migrant workers in Thailand lack any means to support themselves, receiving no pensions. He himself had been housing some very old people and giving them blankets and clothes from his own pocket.

PSRB donation 82 €

Karenni Students Union

PSRB has for eight years now been supporting the most impoverished students in Karenni Camps 1 and 2. Donations go to buy candles so that they can study in the evenings, soap and for other necessities.

The students have been upset by the resettlement process being stopped for Karenni Camp 1 following an incident in early December 2007 in which one of the students was shot by Thai soldiers guarding the camp.

The incident happened when the KSU organised student games and a concert in mid-December. They had permission for this to go on until 9.00 pm, but at 7.00pm they were harassed by Thai authorities. Such harassment had been getting worse and worse for some time, with humiliations like border guards urinating in refugee cooking pots; no one dared to complain.

The KSU students asked if they could continue with a second concert on the 15th December, and were told they could. But Thai border guards, apparently drunk, started to insult them during the concert. One of the students got on the stage with a microphone and called for a demonstration. It was then that Ai Oo, one of the students, was shot and killed. The situation inside Camp 1, is calmer now, but the case had not yet been resolved. This may take up to a year.

750 € transferred to KSU from money raised by the October Marathon runners, plus 1,369 €.

Chiang Mae

The Free Burma Rangers, January 21

Was founded in 1995, has now trained over 40 teams of young ethnic nationality Burmese to walk into those parts of Karen and Karenni States currently suffering Burmese army incursions; some 1 million internally displaced people are there, hiding from the army in the jungles. The Rangers take in medical supplies, vitamins, and other essentials on their backs. They must cross the border illegally from Thailand, and are in danger of being injured by landmines or shot at if they are seen. No humanitarian assistance is officially going to the people they are helping, and they are in great need.

PSRB donated 300 €

Women's League of Burma, January 22

Meeting with a representative of this organisation which supports women political prisoners through the Association to Assist Political Prisoners, many of whom were arrested following the September 2007 demonstrations in Burma: political prisoners in Burma rely on outside donations for their food.

PSRB donated 1,084 €, mostly raised by the Brussels marathon in October

Shan school and orphanage

Meeting with representative of the Shan people, who run a large school and orphanage in the section of Shan State close to the Thai-Burma border; this area is under the control of the Free Shan Army. The schoolchildren are often war orphans and in great need; PSRB has been supporting them for several years. An important donor for this project is apparently pulling out, as needs are so great elsewhere. PSRB hopes to contribute more to this project in 2008.

Mae Sot

Mae La Refugee Camp, January 24 2008

Mae La camp, c. 40 miles from the border town of Mae Sot, is the largest on the border with a stated population in February of 38,693. Over Mae Sot's "Friendship Bridge" comes a steady stream of migrant workers, and over the porous border nearby many refugees Karen State. Many of them live unofficially in the camp, and being unregistered they are ineligible to apply for resettlement in the West. But they remain hopeful that somehow their chance too will come.

The **Karen Women's Organisation** have established a shop since my visit last year, selling woven goods to visitors. 855€ donated through PSRB by Ian Sollars and Holy Trinity Brussels had been spent on building the shop and buying stock; they had taken a loan on another 641€. PSRB was able to ensure this debt was paid.



The shop has been open for a month. It is making sometimes as much as 61€ a day and made 631€ this month. Profits are spent on helping the most needy and on KWO office costs. A recently-arrived volunteer called Snow, a woman of about 40, made an enduring impression on me. When I said that surely it would not be too long before the situation changed in her country her eyes filled with tears. She walked a little way off and tried to hide her emotions.

Snow is evidently a rarity here. But many Karens have unusual names, from my friend Blooming Night, who has stayed with me in Brussels, to Saw (Mr) Fairplay, and a Saw Enormous. The women at the shop are immensely pleased at their success and by your generosity which has made everything possible. They want to call the shop "Sally's", which seems rather tame. Any better suggestions? Write to: sally.steen@gmail.com.

As I have indicated elsewhere in this report the large-scale resettlement programme, which has seen so many community leaders leave for a new life, has created severe administrative problems in the camps, and for PSRB. Others, like our contact at the Karen Refugee Committee who has administered funds for us for six years, are simply getting older and want to retire. For these reasons PSRB will no longer directly support KWO projects but from now on will donate funds directly to the central KWO office. This will allow them more flexibility, including supporting IDP projects across the border.

Care Villa

The landmine victims at Care Villa have been our friends since 2002. Most of these 30 men are deprived of their sight and mobility. Their great love is singing, and thanks to the generosity of a donor in Japan and SOS Birma in Flanders PSRB has provided musical instruments, a computer, and paid music and English teachers. This year we have funded a system for piping water directly to Care Villa, new toilets and a shower, and extra food and clothing. Future plans at Care Villa include building a separate kitchen and dining room and to buy a video camera.

The atmosphere and spirit at Care Villa had improved hugely since my first visit. The men were clean and well dressed and their religious faith very strong. They sang (very well, often in English) songs they had composed. It is very inspiring to visit these young men. Despite the terrible, and irreparable, damage inflicted on their bodies they are models of patience and cheerfulness,

PSRB donated 452€

Second World War ex-servicemen and their widows

Four elderly men and two women, all in their 80s, had come to Care Villa to meet me. The men had all fought on the side of the Allies against the Japanese, and the women were widows of soldiers who had done the same. Since 2000 they had received roughly 67€ every year from the British Commonwealth Ex-Services League. They rely on this tiny sum for extra medicines, vitamins, toothpaste, and clothes, indeed for everything except the monotonous diet of rice, beans, and fish paste they receive in the camp; they have no other income.

I am currently trying to sort out an administrative error at the Burma Forces Welfare Association (BFWA) which administers the money. None of these people had received anything since early in 2006. Repeated emails had produced no reply and they wanted PSRB to intervene on their behalf. Their loyalty to their British officers has meant that, even today, they are referred to as "British dogs" by the military junta. "We cannot forget the British," one old man said to me. "And we are still loyal to them, even if they forget us."



I promised to find out what had gone wrong and try to get these small grants paid again. It seems a small thing to do for the survivors of that great battle for the freedom we now enjoy; for them the war never ended. It would be shameful to let them down all over again.

PSRB donated 21€ each to the six elderly ex-servicemen and widows- 126€

Emmanuel School

The 150 pupils of Emmanuel Church School are mainly drawn from the influx of refugees following the latest military offensive against the Karen. Formerly an Anglican Sunday school, it has expanded into a general primary school because schools in the camp became so stretched.

As noted above, last year many refugees in Mae La started to be resettled in Australia, the US, and in Europe; inevitably this group included many of the youngest and most talented, English speakers, teachers, medics and those working in the CBOs (camp- based organisations).

Many schools have lost teachers whom they cannot replace, which – thanks in part to PSRB funding since 2006 – has not been the case at Emmanuel School which has nine teachers. The task they face can be difficult. Many of the children, aged 4 to 14, are newly-arrived and any one class may contain children of a variety of ages.

Their education in Burma has often been either inadequate or non-existent, and the parents are often illiterate and not always good at encouraging them to do homework.

The school's new roof, a gift from Femmes d'Europe, looked just the thing, robust and high enough to prevent classes from being over-heated by the corrugated iron. Femmes d'Europe also financed desks (either new or repaired), chairs, and cupboards, as well as a big wall-clock.

Emmanuel School's text books and teacher training are funded by the Dutch NGO Zoa. The school committee has requested 3,523 E for the year to run the school, which - to give an idea of its outgoings - pays its eight teachers 10.6 € a

month.

I was asked by the teachers and by Reverend Luther, the Anglican vicar at Emmanuel Church, to pass on very grateful thanks for the gift and for those contributing to the quarterly payments of around 900 from PSRB.

Bristol Grammar School in the UK is contributing over £2,000 in 2008.

PSRB donated 980 €

Mae Tao Clinic, Mae Sot

"Dr Cynthia's Clinic" as it is invariably known, was established by a Burmese/Karen doctor, herself a refugee, in the mid 90's. It has acquired an international reputation, attracting considerable support and doctors from around the world who volunteering for several months at a time.

Although it does not carry out serious operations it treats thousands of refugees and migrant workers, malaria, HIV/ Aids, and landmine injuries among other problems. Patients needing minor operations on, for example their eyes, will walk from remote areas of Burma and wait patiently in Mae Sot until volunteer eye surgeons visit and they can get treatment. Dr Cynthia Maung has received many international awards for her work. I brought a suitcase full of medicines donated by my daughter Dr Lisa Steen, as I have done in other years.

PSRB donated 102 €