

Visit to the Thai-Burma Border January/February 2006

Political situation-general

The precipitate decision by Burma's military government, the so-called State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), to move the country's entire administration out of the capital is no doubt inspired by astrologers, as so much is in the Far East. But it also reflects the regime's paranoia about a possible invasion or attack by an outside force.

A massive, North Korean-type bunker fortress has been constructed in the small provincial town of Pyinmana, 400 km north of Rangoon. As the control centre for a country of 50m people it is manifestly inadequate.

Recently the SPDC removed the right of the Red Cross to visit political prisoners or to deliver essential medicines to them. Aung San Suu Kyi's detention has been extended by another six months.

The large international NGO, Global Fund, which worked with HIV Aids and other medical problems such as tuberculosis common in Burma, pulled out in August 2005. Other NGOs followed suit last autumn because of insurmountable difficulties in working with the authorities.

In February 2006, Paolo Serghio Pinheiro, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, warned of "deep-rooted and worsening poverty, the continuing violation of economic rights and the lack of economic reform, which is subjecting the population to unnecessary privation, and moving the country towards a humanitarian crisis."

Signs of hope

Opposition to the Burmese junta is slowly growing within ASEAN

The resignation of Thai Premier Thaksin, who had close business ties with the SPDC. He has cooperated with Burma to clamp down on the activities of exiled Burmese democracy activists, made life more difficult for those in the refugee camps.

China remains publicly uncritical of its neighbour Burma, but there have been some signs that it is concerned with the spread of HIV aids and drug addiction over its borders from Burma.

Refugee situation

"The Junta's pledges of democratic reform and respect of human rights continue to be empty rhetoric." (HRW Feb. 2006)

Within Karen and Karenni State human rights abuses have recently intensified, resulting in an increased number of new refugees in Thailand. Simultaneously funding for the provision of basic food in the refugee camps has dropped.

Within Karen, Karenni and Shan States as many as 1,000,000 people are thought to be internally displaced. 3,000 villages have been burned, and on the other side of the border the official figure for Karen and Karenni refugees in the camps is 158,000 .

The Burmese government has refused international access to areas of ongoing conflict, cutting off humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons (IDPs) in violation of international humanitarian law. Hundreds of thousands of villagers have been forced to work as porters or labourers for little or no pay. Those who do not properly carry out their tasks are often shot or beaten to death. Government armed forces continue to engage in summary executions, torture, and the rape of women and girls. Children continue to be forcibly recruited by government armed forces.

General situation within the refugee camps.

It became obvious after talking to many people over three weeks that the lack of progress towards democracy in Burma, and the cuts in funding for refugees, were - hardly surprisingly - resulting in further demoralisation.

Temperatures were said to be rising as high as 44 C in the camps during the hot season, possibly because of the effect of global warming. Necessary repairs to refugee huts before the rainy season, beginning in May, were proving hard to carry out as quotas of bamboo had been reduced.

Following is a sample of projects that are supported through funds given in the UK and Belgium.

Chaing Mae 27th Jan. 06

We met with representatives of the Free Burma Rangers. Specially trained to cope with the extreme conditions, groups from FBR walk inside Karen and Karenni States to bring desperately-needed medical and dental help, food and Christian fellowship to the IDPs. They also bring out precious information unavailable to all but the most intrepid; these reports have acquired great authority. They organise the Global Day of Prayer for Burma www.prayforburma.org Believing that God has called them to stand with the people who are suffering they risk their lives to do so.

Mae Hong Son 28th Jan.06

A visit to Karenni Camp 2 Bible College meant five hours on the back of a truck, three of those following an obscure dirt track through the jungle to avoid unwanted attention. We were glad to arrive. But passing a night under the stars with such people was well worth the discomfort. They have dedication, and enthusiasm, and hope against all reason. Both my friend Sarah and I felt a sense of being in a place of blessing and peace.

Despite so many setbacks they plan to recruit four new staff, build three new boarding houses, and repair the existing one. They hope longer-term for a laptop and printer; currently teachers must copy out exam papers for each student.

Our past donations were used for minimal teacher salaries of 10€ per month and student grants of 40 cents; PSRB is their only regular donor.

In addition to gardening, studying and building students and teachers from the College regularly make pastoral visits to the elderly and sick in the camp. They took me to visit a man of 107 who had fought with the allies in WW2. He still remembered the name of his commanding officer. The atmosphere of the college was redolent of a monastery, as was its benign and protective relationship to the local community, in this case 3,700 refugees.

Many of them are former IDPs and the Bible School offers a rare opportunity for them to resume studying. After graduation students often go inside Burma and into Karenni State, and become leaders in their communities

Donation 32,000TB 672€



Karen Project

There has been a generous amount of support through PSRB in 2005 towards the work of the Karen Women's Organisation and also for a group of landmine victims both in Section C of Mae La Camp.

The KWO is responsible for taking care of the most needy; the orphans, mental patients, rape victims, physically handicapped children and the elderly.

The 45 orphans returned cheerfully for their midday break from school, the nursery school children were resting. We met mental patients and children whose parents in the chaos of war, had abandoned them, being unable to cope with their special needs. We were asked for extra help with repairs to their huts before the rainy season sets in at the end of May. Money sent this year had paid for modest Christmas celebrations

and an event for the elderly, for clothes, soap, toothpaste, medicine, water, light, umbrellas and running repairs to the huts.

There are 10,000 people over 60 in the camp which is the largest on the border

Donation 20,000TB 420€



We went over to Care Villa where there are 30 landmine victims living in one hut. 15 of the men have no hands, and the majority are blind. They sang a songs they had written, the first gave thanks to God and a second was called "Hope of the Karen". They enjoyed music and asked for help with buying a cassette and CD player. They hoped to afford to pay for a longer use of the generator for light.

Donation 32,000TB 672€

Projects to Support Refugees from Burma are registered in Belgium as part of the "*Fondation pour la qualité de la vie et les relations*", a registered charity. PSRB's account for gifts is KBC 733-0209249-50 IBAN: BE86 7330 2092 4950 BIC: KREDBEBB Or if you would like to send a UK cheque please post it to Sally Steen, Ave. de la Brabanconne 70, Brussels 1000, Belgium.