

# Burma Border Projects Quarterly

Winter Issue, 2006

"In Service to Aid Ethnic Burmese Refugees, Migrants,  
and Internally Displaced Persons Living Along the  
Thailand-Burma Border."



**Dr. Cynthia Maung**

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# BBP Updates

Dear Friends,

As we take on the new year, I thought this would be a most appropriate time to review this past years' accomplishments along with the challenges we face as we look ahead to 2006.

2005 was a year in which BBP saw its programs along the Thai-Burma border expand in their scope and reach. This could not have been done without the support of countless donors and small charitable organizations such as The Scott Evans Foundation.

Now, we fully sponsor two orphanages in the Mae La refugee camp; in addition, we have doubled our monthly commitment to the schools operated by SAW (Social Action for Women) in the Mae Sot area. Our support of Shan medic Sai Sam and our much heralded "Alternatives to Abandonment" pre-school age childcare program have been sustained throughout the year. We also continue in our financial support of Dr. Cynthia Maung's Mae Tao Clinic.

Perhaps the most significant new development in 2005 was BBP's commitment to send training teams headed by Dr. Jack McCarthy to the border *every four months* to provide the intensive, concentrated training to those groups who, after working with us for several years, have demonstrated to us the most potential to truly benefit from the culturally relevant counseling training for which BBP is becoming known and respected. Jack and Peggy Bacon's next trip is scheduled for February.

As we look ahead to 2006, I can't help but feel a twinge of excitement when I anticipate the number of people, especially children and women, who will be dramatically impacted for the better by our work. But I also must admit to feeling some real concern that new sources of funding must be uncovered in the next few months if 2006 is going to be as productive for us and the people we serve as was 2005.

Your interest in Burma Border Projects is very much appreciated and we all wish you a healthy, safe, and purposeful beginning of 2006.

Cordially,

Michael Forhan  
Executive Director

# Burma News

## ed, Undersupplied

By Shah Paung  
April 01, 2005

Burmese refugees sent to camps along the Thai-Burma border and a special detention center in Bangkok are suffering from overcrowding and a shortage of food and water, according to reports.

“There are too many of us crammed in here and the place is dirty,” said Ko Myo, a Burmese refugee who is being held in the detention center. He went on to say that there are currently more than 250 people in the center awaiting relocation and that although representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, and the Bangkok Refugee Committee visited them today, they did not bring any much-needed provisions.

In July 2003, the Thai government announced that refugees in urban areas who hold Persons of Concern, or POC, status were to be relocated to refugee camps. According to the UNHCR, more than 1,800 Burmese citizens registered for refugee status in Thailand during the period leading up to July 2003.

Ko Myo said that 300 refugees had already been sent from the center to Ban Dong Yang refugee camp in Sangklaburi province while reports indicate another 700 refugees have been sent to camps at Than Hin and Noh Poe.

According to a Karen Refugee Committee official, Noh Poe camp doesn't have enough houses, with some refugees already staying at a nearby school, and they are not even provided with enough water.

The official also claimed that some people with POC status were denied entry to the camp and then arrested by the Thai authorities before being sent back to Burma.

According to English-language daily the Bangkok Post, more than 270 people who had not reported to authorities by yesterday's deadline were arrested and deported. The paper also reported that more than 830 Burmese POCs have reported to authorities for relocation to the refugee camps while waiting to leave for other countries.

## The Politics of Peace

November 2005

By Aung Zaw

Since seizing power in 1988, Burma's State Law and Order Restoration Council—now the State Peace and Development Council—has brokered numerous ceasefire agreements with some of the country's strongest armed ethnic minority groups. These groups have signed on with the regime in the interests of peace and reconciliation, while other groups have resisted the temptation to think that Burma's ruling junta would ever keep its word. Recent developments suggest that such suspicions are certainly not misplaced. Burma's ceasefire groups today face an increasingly untenable position. Mixed signals from Rangoon have left them in disarray as the junta makes gestures of peace with one hand and tightens its grip with the other. Government forces have increased their numbers in recent months in Karen, Kachin and Shan states and other ethnic areas.

Despite proud claims of bringing peace to much of the country's war-torn areas, it seems that Rangoon's War Office has misrepresented the situation. An October 2005 report by the Human Security Centre, titled “Human Security Report: War and Peace in the 21st Century,” ranks Burma at the top of its list of “conflict-prone” countries, ahead of Israel, Iraq and several African nations. The report—three years in the making—covers the years between 1946 and 2003, in which Burma was engaged in 232 armed conflicts.

Burma's military has, in fact, pacified many of its enemies without significant military action. Intimidation, propaganda, and false promises have led many groups to return to the fold. In theory, ceasefire agreements may represent a significant step towards peace—but only if all sides live up to the bargain.

Some 17 ethnic minority opposition groups have entered ceasefire agreements with the junta since 1989. This has subsequently put more pressure on smaller, ill-equipped opposition armies, some of which have subsequently cut deals of their own. Now, only a handful of hard-line opposition groups continue the fight, and their numbers are dwindling. Negotiating with Rangoon, however, does

not always improve matters, as most ceasefire agreements with the SPDC have yet to provide substantial “peace” or “development” in Burma's ethnic regions.

Many groups also face mounting disaffection among their own people, and the junta eagerly takes advantage of such divisions to expand its power base. Those groups that persist in their guerrilla campaign against the junta—particularly the Karen and Shan opposition forces—face a larger and increasingly better-equipped Burma Army.

To make matters worse, the political landscape in Burma's border regions, particularly along the Thai-Burma border—traditionally a safe haven for opposition groups—has changed dramatically. The Thai government had, since the 1970s, employed a buffer zone policy, whereby opposition groups along the border were allowed to remain and operate relatively freely in order to create a barrier against the Burmese military, traditional enemies of Thailand. This policy has since been abandoned as the current Thai government, under Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, is more interested in forging closer economic and political ties with the generals in Rangoon. Thai business leaders are eager to see peace along the border in the interest of expanding trade and overland access to Burma. Thais who once saw Burmese rebel groups as allies have broken faith with them to keep relations with Rangoon on track.

Karen opposition forces—one of the oldest rebel armies in Southeast Asia, since taking up arms in 1949—have engaged in several unsuccessful ceasefire talks with the junta. As with the Mon rebels in southern Burma, Thai military and political leaders have encouraged these negotiations, but all such attempts have so far failed.

Karen rebels continue to defend their land against a growing junta presence. The necessary supplies to stage an effective resistance, however, are lacking and morale is low.

The KNU has for years provided vital support to Burmese dissident leaders, who have praised the group as “tough, honest and faithful in revolution.” Exiled activists and student leaders frequently took refuge in KNU-controlled territory and set up Manerplaw—which fell to government

forces in 1995.

Once a flashpoint for opposition activity, the Thai-Burma border has now suffered an exodus of dissidents and student leaders, who have scattered to Thai border towns or opted for resettlement in Western countries in growing numbers. Current Thai policy and pressure from Rangoon make it unlikely that they will ever return. The decades-long struggle by Karen rebel forces has put enormous pressure on Thailand.

More than 140,000 Karen refugees currently reside in nine refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border. Moreover, aging Karen leaders are either too ill or too weak to direct the opposition effectively and maintain order within the group. Lacking vital military resources, Karen rebels have resorted to using landmines to protect what little territory they still control.

Even if a successful ceasefire agreement were reached in the future, borderbased aid groups warn that clearing landmines—the locations of which have not been adequately mapped—would require an enormous effort.

Despite formal ceasefire agreements with three Karen opposition groups, the junta has gradually increased its presence in the region, thus obviating any return to a buffer zone policy on Thailand's part, while also opening the region to Thai investors eager for direct bilateral contact. Thailand has not, however, entirely abandoned its buffer zone policy, as it still tolerates the presence of Shan opposition forces operating along its northern border—a major conduit for drug trafficking into Thailand and throughout Southeast Asia.

Looking at each ethnic minority region individually, it is not difficult to see that ceasefire agreements with Rangoon have created more problems than they have solved.

In Kachin State, ceasefire groups such as the Kachin Independence Organization have received lucrative logging and mining concessions in return for ending their armed resistance. These concessions allow the KIO to strike deals with eager Chinese investors looking to increase imports of much-needed natural resources—timber, gold and jade—from the region. Revenue from exports to China rarely gets to the hands of those in Kachin State who truly need it, but instead lines the pockets of KIO leaders and their cronies. Illegal logging, prostitution and drug trafficking are on the rise since ceasefire agreements ended major hostilities in Kachin State.

Among Wa forces (formerly part of the

Communist Party of Burma until a 1989 ceasefire agreement), successful negotiations with Rangoon have led to unprecedented levels of criminal activity. Wa leaders are allowed to engage freely in drug trafficking and opium cultivation, despite well-publicized junta rhetoric about eradicating opium production in the region.

In Karenni State, on the Thai-Burma border, the proliferation of ceasefire deals has only deepened the divisiveness of Karenni factions, making the prospects for longterm peace increasingly unlikely as rivalry

over control of rapidly disappearing resources intensifies.

Ceasefire groups in southern Mon State have not fared much better. Far from enjoying peace, many Mon have fled the region to take refuge in Thailand, while those who remain face heavy taxation by a host of rival groups, as the New Mon State Party's 1995 ceasefire continues to breed disaffection among Mon rebels. Veteran Mon leader Nai Shwe Kyin died several years ago, but current opposition leaders are still hopeful that the ceasefire will hold—despite growing frustration and threats of breaking the agreement.

The ouster of former prime minister and spy chief Gen Khin Nyunt—considered by some to have been the principal architect of many of the regime's ceasefire agreements—has led to increased tension in ethnic regions. Junta leaders continue to press ceasefire groups to disarm, and a recent directive from the War Office instructs regional commanders to face any resistance by ceasefire groups with direct military action.

Division, frustration and increasing corruption run high among Burma's ethnic groups. Violence has resumed in many areas. Uncertainty and instability appear to prevail, as the outlook for peace turns grim.

Burma's ethnic opposition leaders must confront an unpleasant reality. The world around them has changed. Limited military capabilities and growing apathy among Burma's neighbors to their cause has made the position of rebel groups increasingly untenable and the possibility that they will trade their weapons and jungle outposts for a seat at the bargaining table more likely.

Ethnic minority leaders and ceasefire groups have been invited to attend the junta-sponsored National Convention—charged with creating a new constitution and ultimately leading to new elections—but so far, they have been given little opportunity to participate directly in the proceedings or to address their goal of

a federal, democratic Burma.

In the final analysis, the junta benefits most from ceasefire agreements. By offering false hopes of peace and national unity, government forces neutralize their enemies, increase their control within ethnic regions, and further exploit regional resources for the benefit of neighboring countries and at the expense of their own people.

The generals in Rangoon may imagine that peace is imminent and national unity is on the horizon—as their bullying and dishonest diplomacy seem to have paid dividends. But national divisions continue to fester and could ultimately give the lie to the junta's halting progress along the much-touted roadmap to democracy.

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# Back from the Border

## by Jack McCarthy

I returned to Thailand in late October for the first training trip of what we're calling Phase II: The Sustainable Counselor Training Program. I think we got off to a promising start.

I spent the first week training the 19 Program Social Workers who work for COERR (Catholic Organization for Emergency Refugee Relief), a Thai NGO. They are Thai, Thai Karen, or Burmese and all have been to college. They serve as the supervisors of the COERR Camp Social Workers who are Burmese refugees who live and work in all ten of the camps. Therefore, the knowledge that these 19 acquired has the potential to cascade down to the 150,000 refugees living in these camps.

It was a great training experience. I had a fantastic translator and students who were already doing the work. We had 29 hours of class time over the five days and were able to incorporate didactic presentations and role plays. Several cultural issues were resolved as they indicated where western practices wouldn't be applicable.

The evaluations of the training were very positive. I believe that many of them have very good helping instincts and that the training gave them the confidence and foundation to take their work to another level. They advocated for themselves for further trainings and were able to influence their administration to commit to two more trainings for March and July. I believe that after the third training they will be able to treat individuals and families and provide comprehensive consultation to the camp social workers as well as have the beginning skills to deal with processing trauma. A fourth training would get them ready to teach.

I then spent a week at Mae Tao Clinic working with members of the Adolescent Reproductive Health Program and the Community Health Workers. The former group was comprised of medics from Mae Tao as well as from inside Burma. The latter are now in Thailand being trained before they return to their different states inside Burma and use their training to meet the medical challenges there. It is a challenge to integrate counseling into a medical setting and I think we worked together to come up with a way that a medic can practice medicine and be sensitive and skilled in switching to specific, proven counseling strategies for specific issues such as domestic violence and addictions. We discussed how the principles of this training could be expanded to HIV/AIDS, TB medication adherence, and other pressing psychosocial issues that they face. They were eager for follow up and they are very busy with their 102,000 patient visits per year, so we have cautious optimism for follow up in March.



# Migrant Work in Thailand

## by Seth Payer (former BBP intern)

After four years working in the Balkans, I felt the need to continue my education in order to deepen my understanding regarding current trends in “development.” During my first week of orientation at Clark University, enrolled in the International Development & Social Change program, I had the opportunity to listen to Michael Forhan, Executive Director of Burma Border Projects (BBP), discuss the work of his organization. Immediately, I was intrigued. When the summer arrived, I talked with BBP and they arranged an internship with MAP Foundation of Thailand. Little did I understand the momentous effect it would have on me, both personally and professionally. Arriving in Mae Sot, I immediately began working, assisting MAP in the set-up of their new office and the daily operations of its “Drop-In Centre.” The drop-in centre worked in many different functions. In one respect, it was a lending library and lounge, a place where Burmese migrant workers could come, check out Burmese language books and video, relax, chat and even sing karaoke if they so desired! It also operated as a centre for information distribution, medical service/referrals and training centre for the activities of fifteen different MAP volunteers, all of whom were factory workers themselves. The centre is located in the middle of a factory district in Mae Sot and served approximately 15,000 workers. The life of factory workers is often an unpleasant one, to put it mildly. Abuses in the factories, such as forced labor, extremely poor working conditions and physical violence are well-documented. The drop-in centre filled a vacuum previously missing; a central location where workers could relax, converse and organize.

Beyond purely organizational matters, such as planning and reports, I had the opportunity to meet with a migrant workers group called Yaung Chi Oo Workers' Association (YCOWA). YCOWA is a labor organization composed entirely of Burmese migrants that provides a variety of different services. These services frequently take the form of supporting those workers in conflict with factory owners, often over issues surrounding withholding of wages, intimidation and physical abuse. YCOWA operates a safehouse, publishes newsletters, provides accompaniment to labor court and other activities in support of migrant workers. Working with the MAP and YCOWA allowed me to see firsthand the abuse suffered at the hands of factory managers, owners, their friends in the police force, various government offices and the paid thugs often hired to harass, intimidate and beat YCOWA members and their beneficiaries. I listened as a seventeen year old female worker described being subjected to electric shock for “spending too much time on bathroom break” and looking at pictures smuggled out of factories, at extreme personal peril, of appalling working and living conditions. I accompanied workers to court and watched as they testified and faced down their tormentors, no matter the great risk to themselves and their families. It would be a massive understatement to state that I was moved by the resilience and courage of these migrant workers, humbled and inspired may come closer to the truth.

Returning to the United States, I continue to work with BBP and hope that my activities this past summer may have laid the foundation for a fruitful partnership with YCOWA and MAP Foundation. The expertise of BBP as regards the effects of mental trauma could be a welcome addition to YCOWA and their members, so frequently the victims of severe psychosocial abuse. I foresee great potential in a partnership between BBP and YCOWA. The access to migrant workers that YCOWA could provide will allow BBP to reach the often overlooked victims of the Burmese military regime, migrant workers.

# SOCIAL ACTION FOR WOMEN (SAW)

## SAW Pre-School

### About SAW

Social Action for Women (SAW) was founded on 25 July 2000 to assist displaced women from Burma who are in crisis situations after having fled to the Mae Sot area of Thailand. SAW is based in Mae Sot and was established to support women facing difficulties through the provision of shelter, health education, counseling, and vocational training for unskilled women. SAW has expanded its focus population to include caring for and educating orphaned children and children of migrant parents. Among the projects run by SAW are the following: the Safe House for abandoned babies (15 abandoned children age 0 to 5 years), the Children's Crisis Center (25 vulnerable children age 5 to 16 years), the Women's Crisis Center (16 vulnerable women and 5 children), Shelter for women living with HIV/AIDS (5 women and two children), SAW's Preschool (37 children), Middle School (176 children), and the Adolescent Reproductive Health Program. By supporting vulnerable women and children, SAW hopes it will strengthen their abilities to face future challenges, minimize their risk of becoming involved in illicit activities and help them develop into healthy and productive members of society.

### Objectives of SAW:

- To assist Burmese women and children affected by displacement along the Thai-Burma border by providing support services in areas of health, education and safe housing
- To empower women to make health decisions about their livelihood
- To provide services for women and children who do not benefit from assistance in refugee camps
- To provide both material and emotional assistance and training to vulnerable women and children
- To decrease the lives lost to sex trafficking and the proliferating drug trade

### Background of the school

There are about 2 million Burmese migrants in Thailand and more than half of them are children under 18. In Mae Sot, near the border with Burma, there are many migrant workers who have left Burma and are residing illegally with their children. Like their parents, the children are brought up in insecurity and face starvation in Thailand. Regardless of their status, both legal and illegal Burmese migrant workers, and their families, are ineligible for educational services. In addition, workers are not allowed to bring their children to work with them. Some migrant families cannot increase their income because mothers have to care for their children on a full-time basis. Moreover, of the 40 primary schools that have been founded, there is only one pre-school in Mae Sot that was opened by Dr Cynthia, near the Mae Tao Clinic. We therefore decided to operate a pre-school in Mae Sot area.

### About the Pre-school

The Pre-school was opened on 3 February 2002, with thirteen children. The total number of students expanded to thirty six; after Burma Border Projects increased its funding, the school accepted twenty four additional students whose parents were facing financial difficulties. The school caters to students aged between two and a half to five. The requirement age for children from the orphanage is two and half years and for children from migrant families is three years.

The teachers hold monthly meetings to find appropriate ways of nurturing the students' mental and physical development. They also meet with the children's parents to discuss the students' development. Teachers also prepare and review lesson plans everyday. The teachers attended the First Aid Training, the Child Psychology Workshop, and the Lesson Plan Workshop for Pre-school Students held by Mae Tao Clinic.

By opening pre-schools for children between the ages of three and five, the community is benefited in a number of ways. Mothers benefit from increased income because they are able to work. They also benefit as a result of having the time to follow subjects that interest them and through improving their skills.

Children also benefit from the pre-school environment. Those who are attending our pre-school gain self-confidence, learn how to be a good member of society, learn discipline, develop intelligence, and have better nutrition. For these reasons we have opened our pre-school in Mae Sot.

### Goal of the school

- To develop children's native language and learn about their culture
- To raise family income (considering the mothers do not need to take care them a full day and can find jobs in the daytime)
- To help children learn how to be a good member of society
- To increase children's physical and mental development
- To develop children's' intelligence and have better nutrition

### Activities

- Teaching basic reading and writing
- Teaching songs and poems
- Games
- Sport activities
- Educational outings
- Providing health care
- Providing nutrition food

All activities focus on self-discipline, community, harmony, obedience, and basic reading, writing, and verbal communication.



Children learning basic reading and writing



Children making paper toys

# BBP Spotlight: the Holy Cross Class of '67

In 1967, I graduated from the College of the Holy Cross with a sense of relief at having somehow survived academically while having a great time with my classmates. The past two summers, many of these classmates have rallied to organize two golf outings to benefit the work of Burma Border Projects. I think Gerry Mulligan's original letter to a few classmates about our project inspired the outings that have been organized by Tom Kelly, Jim Delahaunty, Jim Wilson and Paul Kerns; publicized by Andy McElhaney and promoted by Jay McLaughlin.



One of the teams getting ready to attack another hole.

I cannot begin to express how much this means to me on so many levels. For one thing, it is so much fun to be transported forty years back in time by the contact that these events have produced. The financial impact has been enormous; over \$20,000.00 for the two events.

The personal support I've received has been key. I've had the opportunity to explain the project to people I know and trust. I've received invaluable feedback, which has significantly influenced my thinking. I don't think it's an overstatement to say that whatever I do throughout the year, I'm thinking of how I'm going to try to articulate it in August at the Atlantic Country Club and how the group might respond. This is a blessing both for me and for the people we're trying to serve. Everyone at BBP is looking forward to next August 4th.



Group photo at the post-tournament reception.

# Inside the New Preschool

from Social Action for Women



Children learning to read and write.

Children playing games.



Practicing their writing.



Learning how to write.

Time for lunch.



Nap time.

Burma Border Projects Quarterly- Winter Issue  
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