

April 1, 2009

## NEWSLETTER Theh Mya Seu/Tha mu Lar

The title of this newsletter is "HOPE" in Karenni/Karen as our work gives hopes to thousands of people in East and Southeast Asia region.

No. 1



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Welcome to the second edition of our Newsletter "Theh Mya Seu/Tha mu Lar". (Karen/Karenni language for Hope.) This is a quarterly newsletter published by Refugee and Migration Affairs (RMA) Office in the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, and it provides information on refugee and migration issues and updates our readers on what is happening in our section.

### What's new?

#### **First departure from Baan Mai Nai Soi camp in Mae Hong Son Province:**

35 refugees departed from Baan Mai Nai Soi camp in Thailand's Mae Hong Son Province to the U.S. on February 25. This departure marks the first from Mae Hong Son Province and will be followed with more than 15,000 refugees' resettlement to the U.S. until the end of September 2009.

#### **Generous donation from the Embassy community continues:**

The U.S. Embassy community donated some blankets for babies and children to Bangkok Refugee Center. The blankets were quilted by volunteers themselves and were distributed to Sri Lankan refugee mothers. The NGO Bangkok Refugee Center serves UNHCR-recognized refugees with various nationalities and provides them with free healthcare and education as well as limited amount of living expenses.

### Resettlement

#### **Burmese refugee situation along the Thai-Burma border**

It is not a well known fact, both inside and outside of Thailand, that Thailand has been a generous host to more than 140,000 refugees from Burma for over two decades. There are nine refugee camps located along the Thai-Burma border – 4 camps in Mae Hong Son province, 3 camps in Tak Province, and one each in Kanchanaburi and Ratchaburi Provinces. Aside from the two Northern camps in Mae Hong Son, the majority of the refugees belong to Karen ethnic group, who have been persecuted by the Burmese military regime. Karenni is the second majority group in the entire camp population, but there are many others (Chin, Mon, Shan etc) who have fled the persecution from the Burmese regime. In each camp, refugee representatives form a camp committee where camp management issues are discussed. The issues include health, water and sanitation, education for refugee children and camp security. Camp Committee members were periodically elected

by camp population.

In the camp, health care services, education and other community services are funded by donors, and managed by NGOs and camp based organizations. For example, the U.S. government provides funding to health services in Baan Mai Nai Soi camp, which is implemented by International Rescue Committee (IRC), one of the largest U.S.-based NGOs. IRC works with the Karenni Health Department and trains refugees to become medics and lab technicians to increase the capacity of the refugee themselves.

Aside from working for the NGOs and international organizations operating in the camp, refugees have few opportunities to work and seldom receive permission to go outside of the camps. This contributes to depression and anxiety symptoms are widely seen among refugees. Generally speaking, in Burmese culture, men (husbands, fathers) are the breadwinners of the family, but since they fled

Burma, men have lost the important role. Donors are advocating the expansion of livelihood activities for refugees with the Thai government to achieve more dignified lives for refugees while in exile. As we talk with refugees, a lot of their concerns are about children and their future/education, which resonate with a lot of Americans and Thais. Many parents that I spoken with have chosen to apply for U.S. resettlement as a new life in America will bring more a promising future for their children.

The following sites will introduce you to the lives in Thailand's refugee camps:

Thai Burma Border Consortium (TBBC)

<http://www.tbtc.org/>

UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.org/home.html>

#### **Announcement of Material Support Legislation and closure of the U.S. resettlement program in Tham Hin camp**

As the new U.S. law (called Material Support Legislation) removed certain political/military groups from ineligible category, those Burmese refugees affiliated with a handful of political/military groups are now eligible to apply for the U.S. resettlement program. The camp-wide announcement was made in nine camps along the Thai-Burma border, and it is expected that many refugees who previously selected themselves out of the process due to their affiliation to the groups will come forward and approach UNHCR to express their interest in U.S. resettlement. For Tham Hin camp in Ratchaburi Province, UNHCR, OPE (Overseas Processing Entity, which assists

U.S. resettlement program), IOM (International Organization for Migration), and the U.S. Embassy announced the closure of the U.S. resettlement program and this important change in U.S. law. Refugees have been resettled from Tham Hin camp since 2005, and over 4,000 have left since then for America. Camp Committee members, other leaders and residents were present at the time of the announcement and various questions, including ones about unregistered family members, were raised. Refugees will have to express their interest in U.S. resettlement before June 8, 2009. After that date, no further applications will be accepted.



Deputy Refugee Coordinator made closure announcement of the U.S. resettlement program in Tham Hin camp

## Life in America –A Burmese refugee story-

He calls himself the "Cowboy Villager" as he still sees Texas, the place he first resettled in America, as his home. No one, including himself, would have ever thought of him being a "cowboy" when he was a doctor in Lashio, a small city in northern Shan State, Burma. Having lost the hope for democracy and freedom in his country and fearing imprisonment, he began his long journey as a political refugee by entering India and then Thailand. While in exile in Thailand with his wife and daughter, he received some assistance from a NGO which supports the Burmese democratic movement from Thailand. He and his family were recognized as refugees by UNHCR in Mae Sot in November 2002, and UNHCR referred this family to the U.S. resettlement program. He had to wait two years and four months until the completion of the resettlement process.

The happiest day of his life finally came in February 2005, when he and his family arrived at John F. Kennedy airport in New York. On the next day, he reached his new home in

America, Amarillo, Texas. Upon his arrival, he and his family were received by Catholic Family Services, their resettlement agency, which helped the family set up their life in America. Applying for a Social Security card and signing up for the Medicaid health insurance and food stamp programs were all important steps in the process. Gradually, with the help of the resettlement agency, the family found jobs and began the process of adjusting themselves to a new life in America. His high school aged daughter is doing well in America, and is academically successful at school, exceeding in mathematics.

Later, in 2007, his son joined him and his family in America. The family now lives in Durham, North Carolina, where he works as a Burmese interpreter at the University of North Carolina hospital and is helping other refugees who followed him. This is his way to "give back" all the generosity that he has received from Americans for the past 5 years. His career goal is to become a physician in America, and he has completed some courses towards his goal. He still holds to his long-

standing desire to see changes in Burma, and he hopes that someday he will be able to see his birth village in Burma again.



Sri Lankan refugee mothers receiving blankets donated by the U.S. Embassy community.

## Assistance

### Trip Report: Education program for refugees in Malaysia

After climbing up the narrow stairs, I saw 20 first graders coloring the plane on a piece of paper. Color pencils needed to be shared with others, so everyone was waiting for others to finish using their colors. These children are Rohingya refugees living in Malaysia. This school was set up by UNHCR with the funding from the U.S. government. Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, a Taiwanese based NGO, is operating this school along with other four schools for Rohingya children in Kuala Lumpur, serving 280 students altogether. The Malaysian government does not recognize any refugees. Regardless of their persecution claims, those without any legal document to support their stay are considered illegal migrants and are susceptible to arrest, detention and deportation. Refugees are fearful of frequent raids by the Malaysian authorities on their houses. Consequently, refugees change their address quite often, moving from one house to another. The Rohingya is an ethnic group in Northern Rakhine State, Burma. In spite of the fact that they have resided in Burma since the 7<sup>th</sup> Century, the Burmese government does not recognize them as its citizens. Therefore, they are stateless, having no place to call a home country. The Rohingya are not the only refugees from Burma in Malaysia; there are Chin, Karen, Karenni and many more from Burmese ethnic minorities. Some Rohingya have been staying in Malaysia for as long as 20 years, but there is cur-

rently no avenue for them to legalize their status in Malaysia. They fled Burma due to the persecution they suffered in Burma. However, life in Malaysia does not give much solace to them.

Back in the classroom for the first graders, there were a handful of girls, and they saw me with curiosity but with a big smile. The Program Coordinator from the Tzu Chi Foundation told me the difficulty involved in convincing Rohingya parents to send girls to school. In Rohingya culture, early marriage is prevalent and parents do not believe education is necessary for girls. There are two smaller classrooms in the back, and students were in the middle of figuring how to say different shapes in English. The school curriculum is based on the Malaysian education system; students study math, science, English and Bahasa (the Malay language) in this half-day, three days-a-week school. Teachers are certified Malaysian teachers who are willing to help out refugee children striving to live in Malaysia. All students were proudly wearing uniforms and makeshift student IDs.

The U.S. government finished its funding in December 2008, and this education project for Rohingya children was taken over by UNHCR. The Program Coordinator wants to see more Rohingya children in school in the future so that at least children have some skills to market themselves when they try to find a job in the future.

The U.S. government funded a health clinic operated by A Call To Serve (ACTS) last year. It continues to fund gender-based-violence program for refugee women in Malaysia through International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) and Tenaganita.

To find out more about their work, please visit the following sites:

UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.org/home.html>

Tzu Chi Foundation <http://english.tzuchimalacca.com/>

ACTS <http://www.acalltoserve.org/index.shtml>

ICMC <http://www.icmc.net/>

Tenaganita <http://www.tenaganita.net/>

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### In the Next Issue.....

-Third country resettlement programs for refugees in Thailand

-Progress on the U.S. resettlement program in Mae Hong Son Province

-And more....

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