

# Projects to Support Refugees from Burma

and Help 4 Forgotten Allies – annual trip to the Thai-Burma border 11.01.11 – 01.02.11

## Political Overview - the November 2010 elections Plus ça change? Or a genuine chance to break free?

Burma's parliamentary elections on November 7 were the first since Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy swept to a landslide victory that was never honoured (*below: the poignant cover of Time magazine in 1990*). Daw Suu was banned from taking part in November, and when (most of) the NLD boycotted what was evidently a charade, the party was forcibly disbanded.

Worldwide scepticism about the polls was echoed in Burma by a weary indifference. "We have no idea and no time," one man told the BBC, "to think about these useless things." Over 25% of the seats in the two chamber parliament and the 14 regional assemblies are reserved for the military, and the two major parties which were elected are strongly linked to them. By January it had been made clear how things were to be run: essentially by a new eight-member State Supreme Council (unmentioned in the Constitution) led by Senior General Than Shwe, 78 – the man who headed the old SPDC (*below left, voting*).



Parliament opened at the end of January in the new capital of Nay Pyi Taw, a lifeless Asian Alphaville of silent eight-lane highways, concrete, and glass. No diplomats or journalists were invited and mobile phones banned.



Lt-Gen Thein Sein, 66, was made president, heading the second most powerful body, the 11-member National Defence and Security Council (NDSC) which is mentioned in the Constitution. He helps to preside over what the junta describes as "disciplined democracy"; but both the NDSC and Sr-Gen. Than Shwe's Supreme Council are beyond the reach of the new civilian executive and legislature.

But were the elections better than nothing? Do they open up possibilities for change? Certainly the release of Aung San Suu Kyi on November 13 has inspired much hope. She is held in huge affection by Burmese and ethnic nationalities alike, and her courage, determination, and gentle humour are if anything even more world famous.

But it is plain that she cannot – yet – act as politically as she would like, even to leave Rangoon. She told the FT in a major interview in January: "Sometimes I think that a parody of democracy could be more dangerous than a blatant dictatorship, because that gives people an opportunity to avoid doing anything about it."

But she made clear she had an agenda, and hope: "I think we will move quicker towards change. I am not saying that the endgame is in sight.... But the movement is gaining momentum." As in the Middle East, the Internet – though still so restricted in Burma – is a vital new element. "If the police beat you up," Daw Suu said, "and you can get on to the media immediately and people start shouting about you and for you, then you are empowered."

But everyday life remains very tough. At the time of writing 32% of Burma's 50m live below the poverty line, recent price rises and failed rice-crops due to climate change, making things worse. The Generals meanwhile continue to squirrel away the proceeds of selling off Burma's considerable energy resources, teak, and precious stones, as well as a disgraceful trade in heroin and methamphetamines.

## On the border

The immediate effect of the generals' electoral fraud was to provoke a revolt by a former ally among the ethnic minorities. Fighting along the Thai Burma border was still raging when we arrived in early January, shells landing on Thai territory, and nervous soldiers shooting randomly in the night terrifying children in the border refugee camps.

The defection of part of the quisling DKBA, formerly allied with the regime, hit international headlines when fighting broke out in the border town of Myawadi. Some 20,000 civilians, mainly Burman, fled over the Moei River into the town of Mae Sot in Thailand. The Karen organizations on the Thai side, used as they are to helping fleeing Karen civilians, worked hand in hand with the Thai authorities, and other Buddhist groups and NGO's, to provide these Burmese and DKBA refugees with emergency food and clothing, The "Friendship Bridge" remained shut at the time of our visit, intermittent shelling could be heard on the other side and passengers on tractor tyre tubes continued underneath it.

Further inside Karen State fighting between the Burma Army and the KNLA has intensified as the junta continues its campaign to insist that all ethnic armed forces transform themselves into border guards, in effect integrating them into the Burma Army. Resistance has come from several of the largest ethnic nationalities coupled with threats of allied opposition. The ethnic nationalities form 40% of the population.

Burma Army tactics against civilians have been condemned internationally over many years – the burning of rice fields and villages, torture and rape. We heard first-hand reports of villagers being used as human shields, and of prisoners trucked in from gaol in Rangoon to walk in front of the troops in areas known to be mined.

Civil war has resulted in an estimated one million civilians living as IDPs, hiding out in the jungles. Afraid to go back to their villages of which an estimated 3,500 have been burned, to fetch hidden rice stores, last year 7,000 starved to death with the additional problems of a failed rice harvest. The UN has proposed a commission of enquiry into war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Refugees who manage to make the hazardous journey over the mountains to Thailand join the c. 170,000 warehoused in both the official and unofficial border camps.



The unsettled political situation in Thailand, the main place of refuge for the Karen/ Karenni, may have adverse implications. Thailand's revered King Bhumibol Adulyadej is 83 and ailing; his son Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn, 58, (*centre in photo*) is widely thought to be both corrupt and in league with the fugitive former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, 61.

Street-fighting between pro-Thaksin

“redshirts” and anti-Thaksin “yellow shirts” led to widespread civil unrest and a crisis in tourism during 2010. Thai government policy on the refugees could become more unpredictable. Will there be forcible repatriation? Might the camps be closed down? What of the refugees’ hopes that they might be allowed to find work outside the camps? These are real anxieties.

Nor is news trickling back from the circa 60,000 refugees resettled in third countries uniformly bright. Younger people are usually making a good fist of their new opportunities, especially in Australia, where they benefit from a good education system. In the US, the other main destination, the situation is often more difficult, especially when – as often – the refugees are in effect dumped in deprived areas without the choice of moving closer to other Karen communities. Some older people have even asked, vainly, for permission to return to the camps.

PSRB donated £960 on our 2011 trip to trusted and well established Karen groups for those within Karen state displaced by the Burma army, and for those newly arrived on the border. During 2010 we donated £2,668.

## **January 17 - Mae La Camp Veterans and widows at Care Villa**

PSRB’s Help 4 Forgotten Allies campaign, sponsored by Dame Vera Lynn, has hit a chord in Britain. The aim is simply to give a small annual grant to the 140 surviving Karen and Karenni veterans and war widows who fought with the Allies in 1939-45 and are now living in the border camps.

We met some of them at Care Villa in Mae La camp, handing over the grants and various small gifts including old spectacles collected by St John’s School, Brussels – the old people enjoyed testing these to find ones that were right for them.



One of the eldest, Sein Aye, aged 95, a former Gurkha, now has Alzheimer’s, and his legs are paralyzed. His daughter had come along to fetch his grant money; she and her husband take turns staying up with him at night and feeding him. Caring for the elderly with no back up services whatsoever in a refugee camp and with no electricity or running water, cannot be easy.

Another elderly veteran had walked over the mountains back to Karen State to visit his son, proof of just how tough he must have been 70 years ago as a member of the Spider Group, or Force 136, on special operations under Major Seagram against the Japanese.

The elderly in the camps receive only basic food (rice and beans, see TBBC website for details) but we were told, very elderly people need milk and fresh meat, and cannot afford either, nor can their children afford to buy it for them.

We understand that the rudimentary camp hospital does not in principle treat the very old, concentrating on younger people and on particular diseases such as malaria and TB. A representative of the Karen Elders Advisory Committee, responsible for the distribution of the H4FA grant money, commented that the hospital policy reflects the western attitude of giving priority to younger people. Traditionally the Karen value their elders and seek advice from them, considering that older people have "three heads", a reference to the posture of the elderly, with their knees and heads on the same level as they sit or squat on the floor!

The group of 22 landmine victims, who live permanently at Care Villa, sang for us in beautiful harmony "soldiers go forward and the King will give you the crown of life".

Each veteran or widow received £60, gifts cost £350. Overall spending for the veterans and widows in 2010 was over £12,295 and in 2011 so far £1,860

PSRB donated £213 to Care Villa for the landmine victims.

## Visit to Emmanuel School Mae La Camp

This small primary school of 133 children and nine staff is attached to Emmanuel Church, one of three Anglican Churches in Mae La Camp. The pupils, mainly newly-arrived refugees, have done well in exams thanks to the hard work and dedication of the staff. They have a champion football club, and a thriving parent association. We feel the school's story is a real success. *(Below: the main secondary school in Mae La)*

Zoa, a Dutch NGO, trains the teachers. The Karen Education Department sets the exams and monitors standards. This year PSRB was able to pay for uniforms the school had requested, for all the children, through the generosity of Methodist Central Hall Westminster, and we also financed a Christmas party and other extras. The main funding for teachers salaries and administration, has been met by another donor this year, though PSRB has been the main donor since the school was set up in 2002. However we learned that the 2010 – 11 donor is not able to continue in the next academic year, and the school again appealed to PSRB to meet their running costs for the next academic year (June - June). We will try to help, but urged the school to persuade resettled refugees to raise funds in North America and Australia.



Additionally this year the school needs a concrete floor and an exterior wall. In the rainy season the school floor of mud becomes impossible. They also requested a globe and maps.

PSRB donated £150 to the school. During 2010 we provided over £3,000.

## January 19 Mae Sariang Visit to Mae La Oo and Mae Ra Moo camps

Mae La Oo Camp is reached over four hours' truck journey on rutted tracks through beautiful hill country, and then a 10-minute journey by long-tailed boat along the border. The camp chief, told us of shelling all through the night four km away on the Burma side with 120mm and 81mm shells. The children in the camp, had been frightened, and they had told them that the "bullets won't arrive", but there was some worry that the camp could get attacked, something that has not happened since 1988.



Again we brought presents of food and soap etc for the veterans and also spectacles, again received with great pleasure, the younger people who had come to fetch the grant money for their family member, choosing dark glasses! At Mae Ra Moo camp – back down the river – we met the Baptist minister, Rev. Tha Kha, 86, who had fought under the famous General Wingate before he was a general. He had lived at the camp for 12 years. We also met three veterans' widows.

## 21 – 24 January - Mae Hong Son Karen National Women's Organisation

The KNWO office is just outside Karenni Camp 1 pop. 12,000 though unofficially it could be as many as 20,000. Four young women sponsored by PSRB had just completed their training to become KNWO staff members. None were eligible for resettlement, because they had been in the camp too short a time, which is KNWO's gain: it has lost over 80 of its staff members (*two of them pictured left*) to the resettlement program and urgently needs new ones.

Training includes such subjects as networking, advocacy, campaigns, child development, child protection, capacity building and women's rights.

One of the four was particularly interested in counseling, a skill much in demand in such an environment. Overcrowded camp life, with no occupation for the rice farmers, coupled with uncertainty about the future and memories of the traumas they have suffered can result in drink problems and depression. Part of KNWO's work is to facilitate awareness and solutions to this kind of problem which often enough leads to domestic violence. One way to do this is through drama to help people discuss solutions and to share problems.



PSRB has donated £1,106 so far in 2011 and £612 in 2010

## January 24 - Karenni Camp 2 Bible College

The meeting with representatives of the Bible College of Karenni Camp 2 took place in Mae Hong Son. They began by sincerely thanking me, and all those who have donated money to the College

The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the Bible College is on March 10, and it is hoped many of its graduates as well as representatives of churches and colleges will travel to the camp to join in the celebrations.

I asked about the current situation of their library and the structure of the studies they teach. Did they have enough books? It was considered that the reprinting of their textbooks two years ago with PSRB funding was adequate. The students don't keep their textbooks on completing the study course but hand them back.

The course is taught in the Karen language, by teachers, who will usually have trained at the Insein Baptist Convention in Rangoon. I ask how good is the students' level of literacy. Apparently there are initial problems with students who can read but not write well in Karen. The first six months at the beginning of the course are devoted to improving their writing.

The four new teachers, all trained in Rangoon, were recruited last year after the Bible College lost several of its teachers to the resettlement programme; all are doing well.

The qualification offered by the Bible School is called Christian Theology Studies (CTS), but because of the ban on refugees traveling along the border graduates cannot go on to Pastor Simon's Bible College at Mae la camp, (the best-known and prestigious of the camp Bible Colleges) to obtain a Bachelor's degree. The alternative is to study in Toungoo, in Eastern Burma; four students are being funded by churches to do this.

I asked if a bursary for the most promising student would be a good idea. What would it cost? Apparently it would come to 300,000 Kyat, (the Burmese currency), or 375\$ a year to keep a student at Taungoo. This would cover the school and boarding fees, stationary and books extra. Becoming a "Reverend" depends on the recommendation of the student's church and Bible College, and to have been a Pastor, or CTS graduate for 7 years.

I ask about their current needs. They need oil for the generator, which they buy through funding from Karen Aid. Staff stipends are paid by donors in Norway. PSRB funding this year paid for building housing for two of the teachers, stationary, the opening ceremony of the college, transportation, communications, and extra food for the students.

A further donation through PSRB will pay for an extra computer, repairs to existing computers, and the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary event.

PSRB has donated £1,106 so far in 2011. During 2010 PSRB donated £1,151