

# report-2012

## TRIP REPORT 2012

### Projects to Support Refugees from Burma

#### and Help 4 Forgotten Allies – annual trip to the Thai-Burma border 08.01.12 – 28.01.12

Burma's parents the Army or the people?

A fragile Burmese Spring is beginning to melt the ice of silent hatred in which the Burmese population have held their government. After decades of brutal suppression of political opposition, of enduring severe economic hardship and notorious human rights abuses the people are beginning to hope that change is real. The process last year got off to a slow start following the elections of November 2010 and the release of Aung San Suu Kyi  shortly afterwards.

By July 2011 meetings began between her and President Thein Sein which were positive. People found it hard to believe that “a leopard could change it's spots” and considered that the government's motives must be to gain the chair of Asean in 2014 and curry favour with the international community hoping sanctions would be dropped. If they were dropped, would the resulting benefits go as before to line the pockets of the generals or to benefit the people? But as reform has followed reform, political prisoners have been released, an unpopular dam project cancelled, peace treaties with the ethnic nationalities signed and Aung San Suu Kyi allowed to travel the country in a bi election campaign, even the “ethnic rebels” will admit to “cautious optimism”.

In early February the government affirmed Aung San Suu Kyi's candidacy for the bi elections on April 1<sup>st</sup>. If elected, her party the National League for Democracy, would have a voice in parliament. On the 17<sup>th</sup> February the European Council announced it was lifting some restrictions on Burma. The Special Rapporteur for Burma to the UN - Thomas Quintana, recently said that “the newly elected government has “surprised” the international community with “the speed and breadth of reforms,” and now was the time to continue the process, to achieve national reconciliation..... serious challenges remain and must be addressed.” He was especially concerned about the ongoing violence in the Kachin State. He further stressed that the bi-elections will be “a key test” of the reform process; officials of the Burmese Election Commission said the use of international observers “was under consideration”.

Although a ceasefire between the Karen National Union and the government was signed last month, in  Kachin State 45,000 civilians have fled fighting despite a ceasefire agreement. Many question President Thein Sein's control over the Burma Army. In a speech of March 1<sup>st</sup> he referred to the people as the “mother and father of the nation” a bold statement in stark contrast to the often repeated “ The Tatmadaw (Burma Army) is both mother and father of the State”, this is perhaps aimed at army factions within the government unhappy with the speed and nature of reforms.

The world has taken a keen interest in this country that was for so long cut off, watching Hilary Clinton's historic visit and the joy with which the people greet Aung San Suu Kyi's speeches. As Ben Rogers of Christian Solidarity Worldwide wrote “for the first time in more than 20 years, Burma has a chance of change.”

#### On the Border

Within the refugee camps there is great uncertainty about the future, will the dream of going home become a reality? What is the future for the Karen and Karenni, after over 60 years of armed struggle, can a federal system become the reality they have hoped for? Making up over 40% of the population, the ethnic nationalities

have pressed for tri partite talks between themselves, the government [Translate](#) After years of mistrust and abuse the process will involve “thousands” more steps as Saw Tamlá Baw, President of the KNU has warned.

Mae Sot 17<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> January 2012

This “Burmese town” on the Thai side of the border between Thailand and Burma, has a population 50% Burmese; many thousands of migrant workers labour long days in sweat shops. Improved relations between the two countries, means new building and developments in tourist infrastructure. Flights to Mae Sot have restarted after a gap of almost a decade. Road signs in Burmese have appeared; the route to Yangon/Rangoon through Mae Sot is a quick one.

For those in the camps funding is more and more restricted. Discussions are taking place between Thailand, Burma and the UNHCR and NGO’s concerned, over the refugees options if the camps close. These are repatriation or work in Thailand; resettlement in third countries is now closed.

I met with the Chairman of the Karen Refugee Committee, which oversees the day to day running of the camps. Pastor Robert Htway’s opinion was that first the internally displaced civilians, should be allowed to go back to their villages in peace, before a gradual process of sending back those in the camps begins. All of this depends on a fragile peace. In January new arrivals fleeing the dangers in Karen State were still arriving, the changes in the country are so far only benefiting those in the cities.

19<sup>th</sup> January Visit to Mae La camp - Care Villa

 Care Villa, a small home for 16 landmine victims, is a casualty of the new strategies, having recently lost its funding from an NGO, Clear Path International. The men who spend their lives disabled by blindness and immobility, sit under a hot tin roof with little to do. (Courtesy to [www.layersofthailand.com](http://www.layersofthailand.com) for the photos). For the most part they are ex Karen soldiers and lost their sight while attempting to defuse landmines, or lost their legs by stepping on one.

They take pleasure in singing; the funding they lost paid for some care, extra food, toiletries, and teaching. PSRB has contributed to their annual needs for many years and hopes to help to replace some of their lost funding in 2012.

Veterans meeting in Care Villa

There are now 61 Karen veterans and widows in this area. Though “old soldiers never die” yet the list shortens at an increasing rate each year. This year the grant money has been increased to £80 each, and we have provided an emergency fund for health needs during the year. The grant by western standards is meagre, and the situation for veterans on either side of the border lamentable for men who risked their lives to defend freedom. Among others at Care Villa we met:

Saw (Mr) Maung Mya, aged 85, who served with Force 136 - British Special Forces, while Karen State was occupied by the Japanese. There were no “walkie talkies” he told me in those days, he was a wireless operator. He served under Captain Williams and Major Foot who had been parachuted in. He is blind and appreciated my firm handshake. He told me that in 1965 he was captured by Burmese soldiers in Karen State and hit on the head with a brick, this damaged the nerves to his eyes, and caused his blindness. I asked him, if his children took care of him, but he says they have been resettled to the US, over there they are finding regular employment hard to come by. He lives in the camp with his wife and neither of them are keen to join their children, though urged to do so.

Saw (Mr) Christ had arrived in camp recently. He said his decision to leave home was because he could no  longer make a living and he had been forced into serving the Burma Army. He lives with his daughter and son in

law; his wife had died. He had left three other daughters behind in Karen State.

During the war he had been in the Spider Unit, (Special Forces) joining up at 16. The famous British officer, Major Seagrim, nicknamed "Grandfather Longlegs" by the Karen, because of his height, was hidden from the Japanese by the Karen while he got out information to the Allies. When this was discovered, the Japanese began to torture the Karen to force them to give him up. Seagrim insisted on giving himself up to stop the torture. Saw Christ worked closely with him for two and a half months, and he remembers Seagrim telling them that the situation was not good and they should go home, but they had refused to leave him. If he hadn't surrendered he would have been safe, said Saw Christ, as if still regretting Seagrim's subsequent beheading by the Japanese. I asked if he had been awarded any medals? He told me that he had lost these and all his records when the Burma Army burnt his house. He had been forced to become a unpaid porter for the Burma Army; the soldiers had hit him about 6 times over his whole body, as you would hit a bullock he said. He had to carry very heavy loads, while the soldiers carried nothing.

Saw (Mr) Lin Aye had found the five minute walk to get to Care Villa hard; he arrived leaning on his grandson. He told me that he had fought at Bassein, with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Karen Rifles. He is 88 and not in good health. He had come to Mae La camp in 2006 and he is trained as a Pastor. I explained to him, that people in England wanted to send their thanks and recognition of his sacrifice and service during the war and tears came into his eyes. I added that he had fought for our freedom against the Japanese and I was sorry he had lost his own, being confined indefinitely to a refugee camp. He left with a big smile and a spring in his step.

#### Emmanuel School

This Anglican primary school, founded in 2002 to educate children of newly arrived refugees, now has over  200 pupils. The children arrive in camp having lived rough in the jungle while hiding from the Burma Army, and often have little or no education. They may have gone through the traumatic experience of fleeing their villages and seeing family members killed. The school operates a non discriminatory policy and children are from Buddhist, Animist or Christian backgrounds and may be any of the ethnic nationalities or Burmese, though they are largely Karen.

 A programme of speeches and songs had be organized to entertain us. We asked the children to put their hands up to show if they were Karen, Karenni, Burmese, Kachin, Shan, or Mon and asked them to live and play together in peace and said we hoped this would be the future for their country and it would be for them to build it.

We were shown the improvements made to the school; a new hall with cement floor. Over lunch there was a meeting between PSRB and the school committee. We discussed what would happen to the school should the camp close, and the current cuts in funding for education in the camps. They plan to set the school up in Karen State if there is closure. Teacher salaries in some camp schools are now as little as £5 a month, and there have been cuts in school supplies. Visiting the camp had become harder for foreigners, this has led to a sense of greater isolation for those in the camps.

Mae Hong Son 24<sup>th</sup> – 27<sup>th</sup> January

#### Karenni National Women's Organisation

This is our third year providing funding for young women to be trained as KNWO staff members to replace staff who left the camps to be resettled in third countries. I met with last years interns who are now confident and active staff members and involved in training others and heard about their work, as well as meeting this years new intake.

 Many women, newly arrived in the camps are unaware of the changing roles of women in the world, they lack education and confidence. KNWO aims to give them a voice and purpose in their societies and encourage them to develop skills. In Burmese society leadership has been the province of elderly men. A fresh wind is blowing and Aung San Suu Kyi has been a powerful inspiration.

I ask KNWO how they see their future. They tell me that they cannot imagine it, it seems like a dream that they would be able to go home. Certainly if it happens there would be an important role for KNWO in their homelands and PSRB is proud to have helped to shape it. Of the leaders of their country they say, "power makes people like a stone, it kills the spirit".

#### Meeting with Karenni representative H4FA 25<sup>th</sup> January

Taking on the responsibility of distributing grants to Karenni veterans in the two Karenni refugee camps, I found our representative there conscientious and keen to document the veterans memories, and to film them for historical records. This year we plan to ask veterans and widows individually if they need things such as a hearing aids, blankets, jackets or extra food, and glasses.

We talk about contact with Karenni State and he explains that contact has become better, with people travelling in and out, though illegally, and that there is a more secure phone connection to the capital Loikaw. I hear that one well known veteran in Loikaw, has sent messages asking for someone from our organisation to visit him now that Burma is "open", so that he can thank the donors through us and offer a salute and pray together, before he dies. His 1st leader he writes was Major Seagrim.

#### Karenni Camp 2 Bible College

The college is in the smaller of the two Karenni camps; pop.3,481. It has 30 students, and 9 staff, and serves the camp through youth work, visiting the sick and elderly and running a home for children. These children are war orphans, or were sent to live with relatives in the camp. Since only immediate members of a family were allowed to resettle, these children were left behind. A third category is children of parents too poor to support them inside Karenni State who implored the Bible College to shelter them.

The College has a visionary plan to provide students with a degree in Theology beyond the current certificate level. Finding a Bible College in the bigger cities prohibitively expensive this would be a welcome alternative for students. Academic contact has been improved for the college, by the computers PSRB has provided. Assistance has been offered in staff, study materials and curriculum advice, to achieve this target. Travel has become easier; a permit now takes one week instead of three months. Exams would be taken in Yangon/Rangoon.

12 years ago when the college was established it seemed an impossible dream to them. However they were granted permission by the Thai authorities. Now they feel the college is running well. They have many successful graduates, useful and successful work within the camp, and income generating projects such as weaving, pig rearing and a fish pond. They conduct missions to the Thai villages in the area and their choir is popular there. Their office is well equip with computers.

Their future in the camp too is uncertain and the college would move to the Burma side of the border, they wonder when it will be safe to do this. They believe peace will be slow. Meanwhile as for all the camp residents funding is being reduced before any time frame for repatriation has been established.

#### P.S. IN THE NEWS

Through this link you can find a recent interview with Sally Steen, who returned from the camps in January 2012.

<http://celebster.com/spotlight-highlighting-the-work-of-the-projects-to-support-refugees-from-burma/>

When Sally was in Mae La, she met filmer/photographer David Longstreath. He kindly shared some of his footage that he shot in the camp. These are the first and most recent moving images we can show you from Camp Mae La [through this website](#), and also [this one](#).

Another interesting site for more news is <http://www.irrawaddy.org>.