



Projects to Support Refugees from Burma and Help 4 Forgotten Allies



Trip report

Annual trip to the Thai-Burma border 22.01.13 – 19.02.13

By Sally Steen

A year of President Thein Sein's reforms in Myanmar/Burma

Last year's PSRB trip report announced the dawning of the Burmese spring; since then there have been astonishing developments in a country that seemed for so many years frozen in time. Despite the compromised elections



Photo: Parliament buildings

in November 2010, and the resultant new parliament, dominated by military and ex military, an unfolding Burmese summer, has seen many longed for freedoms for the people. Democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, or "the lady", is now allowed to travel outside the country. She has received honours from the international community, was elected to the parliament

and given significant roles in it. Her good understanding with President Thein Sein, his reforms of increased press freedom, the lifting of travel restrictions, amnesty for political prisoners, an end to forced labour, a 25 year old ban on public gatherings lifted, have given people hope that the bad old days are gone forever. The international community consequently has lifted trade sanctions, forgiven debts and invested heavily. In 2015 Myanmar will have the chairmanship of ASEAN.

Like a British summer however the progression on the road to democracy has its mixture of hopes and disappointments. There is caution still, especially among the ethnic nationalities. There is war in Kachin state, and bitter disputes in Western Burma between the Arakanese and Rohingyas. Rumours abound that the old dictator Than Shwe still holds the real power, that President Thein Sein cannot control the army, and that China may not tolerate true democracy on its borders when the 2015 elections come around.

Economy and Parliament

Economically the reforms have opened the door to new loans; Japan recently promised \$440 million and Asia Development \$512 million. Debts have been wiped away; the Paris Club recently cancelled \$6 billion of them. A pipeline linking China with the Indian ocean through Burma, currently under construction, is yet another concession to China's dominant position in Myanmar/Burma. Some cities, notably Mandalay and Lashio, have such large Chinese populations that they are described resentfully as "Chinese" cities. Surprisingly in the international "scramble for Myanmar's" natural resources, work on the Chinese run Myitsone dam, in Burma's Kachin State, was blocked by the Burmese government, following demonstrations by the Yangon/Rangoon glitterazzi. Commentators saw this as a green light to the West; who subsequently ramped up their presence; an example of how Burma uses diplomacy to play off the East against the West for its own gain. President Thein Sein recently completed a successful "five nation" tour in Europe. India and China watch each other, greedy for influence over a country rich in natural resources.

The Lower House of the parliament in Naypyidaw is "slowly emerging as an effective check and balance on the parliament" and this "demonstrates the maturing of Burma's nascent democracy," commentators at the Euro Burma Office write. Disappointingly though, the parliament recently voted in over 20% of the country's budget to defence, while only 4% was allocated to education and 3.9% on healthcare. These systems were "left in tatters" by the corrupt former junta. Corruption persists and recently the US referred to a "handful of cronies" who "control the economy". Nevertheless progress has become irreversible and optimism is abroad.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Elegantly walks a fine line between the demands of parliament, her party, the ethnic nationalities and the international community. She was recently reappointed as National League for Democracy leader at the first party congress the NLD had held in 25 years. The party is thriving though there are complaints that the leadership is too old and dominated by the "uncles". She was appointed to a commission of enquiry into the current constitution; changes to this would be seen as a key development. Currently she is disqualified from holding the presidency due to her marriage to British Michael Aris. Although "the lady" occupies a place in the people's hearts, she has attracted some criticism. Appointed to an enquiry into the use of white phosphorus, by the police, to break up angry demonstrations at Letpadaung Copper Mine, central Burma, her findings did not please the public. Many villagers had lost their land, monks demonstrating with them were badly burnt by the phosphorus.

Ethnic nationalities

Tomas Ojea Quintana, UN investigator, wrote this month that, "There remains a large gap between reform at the top and implementation on the ground." This week the UN and EU called for an investigation into human rights abuses

including continuing illicit forced labour, and land-grabbing for valuable resources. The strong presence of the Burma Army continues to be endured in the ethnic nationality regions. The Ethnic make up 40% of a population of 50 million and occupy 60% of the territory, often mountainous.

800,000 Rohingya's were dismissed by the government last summer, as, "illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, not Burmese citizens". Disputes between Moslem Rohingya's, and Arakanese Buddhists have displaced 120,000 in Arakan state, Western Burma since June 2012. This week has seen anti Muslim riots spreading through Burma/Myanmar.

In the North East, Kachin State, fighting between the Burma Army and the Kachin Independence Army has been intense since fighting broke out in June 2011. There are now 70,000 IDPs, and 30,000 refugees in government controlled camps there. Despite the announcement of a ceasefire on 19th January 2013 the army, opened fire next day and took Laiza the KIA headquarters. This wrote the Euro Burma Office "led many to ponder the unity or disunity within the administration regarding the Kachin crisis" Could the President control the army, would international pressure change things? Perhaps, commented the Economist, the Burma Army calculated that the West has now invested so much, politically and economically in Myanmar's reforms that "it will not let an ugly little ethnic war derail the new engagement."

The Burma Government appears to regard the "ethnic problem" as an economic one, while the ethnic nationalities, notably the Karen, after 64 years of armed struggle, regard it as political. President Thein Sein's "Myanmar peace process" has been successful in signing 13 cease-fires in one year; but the details have yet to be worked out. The government is offering development money rather than the federal system that the ethnic people have long struggled for.

On the Thai Burma Border

The dream of going home is fast becoming a concrete hope for the 150,000 refugees. They continue to wait for terms to be worked out. Issues such as land ownership, landmine clearance, and the terms of the peace treaty between the government and the Karen National Union are still to be settled. The time frame laid down by the Thai and Burma governments and the Thai Border Consortium is two years. The Thai Border Consortium which provides the refugees with their food rations, has realigned its programme from "care and maintenance" to preparedness for return." Refugees may choose to remain as migrant workers in Thailand, or go home. The resettlement process to third countries is completed with a total of 81,700 people having left.

In expectation of the refugees return to Karen State and the closure of the camps, money for rations, is being steadily reduced by donors. The "remittances" from relatives in Australia, US and Europe have become a lifeline for the camp inmates. The poverty and overcrowded nature of the camps is evident.

Visit to Mae La Camp 27th January 2013

In the refugee camps and along the border there are now 117 veterans and widows from the 2ndWW Burma Campaign, who fought alongside the Allies, among the Karen and Karenni. Help 4 Forgotten Allies supports them with an annual grant. The Karen Refugee Committee is responsible for the distribution of the grant money to 66 of them, and accompanied me on visits to Umpiem and Mae La camps.

In Mae La we met veterans at **Care Villa**, home to a group of 16 landmine victims. Last year Care Villa lost it's funding and residents receive only very basic rations. The men who spend their lives disabled by blindness and immobility, sit under a hot tin roof with little to do. 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. PSRB has contributed to their annual needs for many years.

Veterans meeting in Care Villa

This year the grant money has been increased to each, with provision of 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, but the now very elderly group were very pleased with their cash and individual presents of food and essentials.



Photo: Veteran signing for his grant money



Photo: Veteran and his wife

Among others at Care Villa we met: **Mr P.**, who made a short speech on behalf of the others. "Since you came, we didn't say anything. We would like to say thank you so much, because of your long journey, and the long distance you traveled to see us and bring us the grant money."

One old man of 94, had traveled a long way himself, to collect his grant money. He had come from the Papun area, inside Karen State. It was here the famous wartime hero Major Seagrim, had been hidden from the Japanese by the Karen, at great cost

to them. Saw Hla Tin remembered Seagrim; he fought with him. He reminisced; "The Brit. Army went to India. My officer was Cpt. Williams. When the Brit. soldiers came back to Burma it was with parachutes." He remembers too that the Japanese soldiers "shot at them a lot", that he was in three battles and with the Spider Unit of Force 136.



Mr. X was with his wife of 84, he asked very reasonably if he could also have next year's grant money, so he would not need to make this long and difficult journey, through the jungle and over mountains, on very inadequate roads, again in 2014. I agreed. He had a comrade in his village, aged 95, not fit enough to travel, and asked if he could take

his grant money to him, to which I also agreed. He was very earnest and very clear minded. I said if he wasn't a soldier, I would suggest he needed a body-guard now, to carry all that grant money back, and finally he smiled. He walked off, with his stick, straight backed, carrying the "luxury goods" I had bought him, his clothes old and ragged, his wife beside him, it was a touching sight.

Gifts of food and toiletries to elderly in two camps £215. Grant money to 66 including administration and next years grant money for Mr. X.

Emmanuel School, Mae La camp

Is a small Anglican primary school, founded in 2002; it now has 192 pupils, and seven teachers. The children may have been born in the camp or fled the Burma Army with their families, before the ceasefire of January 2012, and have had little or no education. Children are from Buddhist, Animist or Christian backgrounds and may be any of the ethnic nationalities; they are predominately Karen. his year I met the new and enthusiastic young headmistress, Gloria, who has added art, gardening, sewing and music to the curriculum. I was interested to see that the current craze at Emmanuel School is marbles!



Photo: Teacher at Mae La Camp



Photo: It was a joy to see the children again and watch them perform a play they had written them-selves.

The vicar of Emmanuel School felt that the money given by PSRB regularly for the last ten years is a miracle that waters the plant of the children's potential and creativity. When the camps close, he said, the Church and school plan to return to the original village from which they fled in the mid nineties. It is hard to make plans; rations in the camp have been cut from 16 kg of rice per adult, per month to 12 Kg.

Teacher salaries too have been cut, and in most camp schools, they are now as little as £8 a month; parents are asked to contribute 40p per child, per year, but since refugees are not allowed out of the camps to work, and unless they are receiving remittances from relatives abroad, even this is hard to find. Parents at Emmanuel School are not asked to pay and PSRB ensures that our dedicated teachers are paid £30 a month.

PSRB has donated to Emmanuel School during the last year.

Mae Hong Son 1st to 4th February

There are a total of 39 Karenni veterans. Inside Karenni State, for those living in remote areas, landmines are the "invisible enemies" and transportation costs, make the staple food rice, more expensive. I was told of a veteran of 96 years old carrying home his vegetables alone; shaking with exhaustion, and of another who had traveled to Mae Hong Son for dental treatment but on returning home found his hut and land seized by the Burma Army.



Photo: IDP Veteran

We visited **Karenni Site 2 – Ban Surin**, pop. 3,400 to meet the 6 veterans there taking their grant money and gifts to them.



Photo: Sally with veterans at Karenni Site 2 before the fire on 22nd March '13, in Karenni Site 2 – Ban Surin.

On March 22nd there was a very serious fire in this camp; it has killed 36 people and destroyed 400 homes leaving over 2,300 homeless.



[Screenshot YouTube \(TheBorder Consortium\): other images are too shocking](#)

Unconfirmed reports say that elderly people and children died as they could not run away fast enough and that the fire encircled them. During the hot season before the rains come in these tightly packed camps, fires are a constant danger and on this day there were high winds. To date we have heard that at least three of the 6 veterans in this camp escaped death.

On our visit in early February, everything was peaceful at the camp. One old soldier recounted his memories of British aeroplanes dropping two wirelasses, of having to search in the jungle for them unsuccessfully. Another's chief concern was for the future and the next generation; the hope that they would have peace and freedom in Karenni State. The veterans were in need of the sort of help in their old age that we take for granted, for example glasses, hearing aids and pain-killers. This year H4FA bought gifts for each in the camps; one was given a mattress for the first time in his life! Alas now probably burnt.

One ex Karen Rifles soldier asked to me to pass on his thanks for support, and to wish donors good luck.

Two months ago a British journalist Mark Fenn, interviewed this group; the Imperial War Museum's Living History project is interested by the stories of these now very old men and their affection and loyalty to their British officers. Many tell me that they pray for the Queen.

£65 was spent on food and essentials in the camps and on grants for 39 Karenni veterans.

Karenni Bible College

It seems from unconfirmed reports that the Bible College supported by PSRB since 2002, has been completely destroyed by the fire. PSRB is putting out an appeal so that they can rebuild.

I was fortunate to visit last month; in the past few years this had been impossible due to tight security. I found the Bible College thriving at that time. With new buildings to house students, staff and a group of orphaned children it was an important source of support for the community. There were new fish ponds and the addition of pigs and white doves.

The College had established a wider support base from Thai villages nearby, within Karenni State, through Theological Colleges in Chaing Mae and Yangon and ex students and relatives who had been resettled in Finland and Australia.

The College had 17 students, and 5 staff running a basic course in Theology. Books had been donated by a Theological College in Chaing Mae, to enable a further 8 students keen to gain a degree to make a start. There hope was to bring in 3 teachers from Yangon to teach this course. Opportunities to study for young people in the camps are very limited.

People in the camp had agreed to continue to live together inside Karenni State when the camp closes. They hope that transportation and communications may be easier than at their current location. Living in such an isolated area for many years they have become an integrated community. They have begun to explore possible locations, but the terms of the ceasefire are yet to be worked out, and they do not feel safe to move yet. It is yet to be seen what difference the fire will make to these decisions.

Karenni National Women's Organisation

This is our fourth and final year providing funding for young women to be trained as KNWO staff members, replacing staff who left the camps to be resettled in third countries. This year's intake of four young women had come from Karenni State rather than the two camps.

KNWO aims to give women 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.

Last year I asked KNWO how they saw their future and they told me going home seemed like a dream. This year they said it had become a reality and KNWO was working for the community in Karenni State. Attitudes on both sides of the border had shifted through increased communication and KNWO have faced this challenge and made good connections back home. They

have an important role there and PSRB is proud to have helped to shape it. Contributions to KNWO from PSRB in 2012/3 were made.

H4FA Visit to Yangon and Myanmar February 6thth to 19th^h 2013

The Karen veterans and widows inside Myanmar/Burma number 310. They are supported by the Burma Forces Welfare Association and were given 32\$ or £21 each this year. Concern was expressed by veterans on the Thai Burma border for their comrades in arms back home, and their situation; their poverty is apparently often so great that they do not have enough for 2 meals a day. H4FA decided that rather than increasing the grants of the veterans and widows on the Thai Burma border, we would use our extra funds in Yangon. Plans were formed to establish an income-generating project. Set up costs would come through money raised at Norwich Theatre by actress Karen Archer's appeal, and from the friends of Peter Mitchell. Peter Mitchell is a retired army officer who's father was at school with Major Hugh Seagrim. The committee would construct accommodation for students, using the rent they paid to meet the medical and care needs of the Myanmar veterans.



Photo: Peter Mitchell saluting the veterans in Rangoon

Many of these veterans have lived their lives in Burma/Myanmar under the shadow of having fought with the British. The military junta penalised them by depriving them of state pensions and often they were effectively barred from working as government employees because of their former associations. They have no entitlement to pensions in Burma or Britain in recognition of their military service.

H4FA supported veterans and widows on the Thai Burma border and inside Myanmar/Burma in 2012 and in 2013.

Website www.prsb.org.uk

If you have a look at our website, you can watch a short film on the camps and also see more photos.