



THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

Connecting  
Past and  
Present:  
Field study  
along the  
Thailand  
Burma  
(Myanmar)  
Border



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A REPORT TO UNIVERSITY NEIGHBORHOOD PARTNERS





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Field Study along the  
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A report to  
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May 2008

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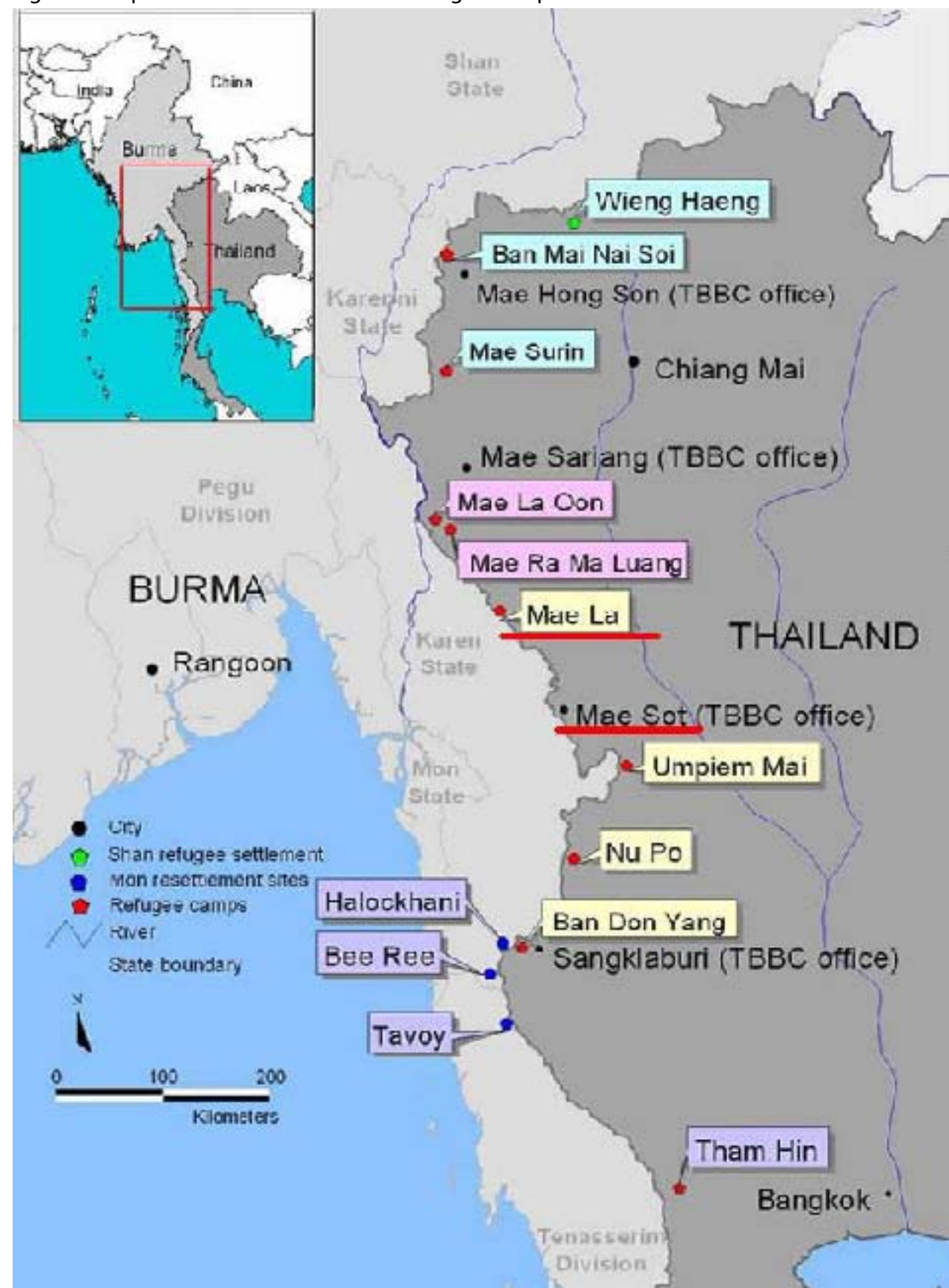
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Figure 1: Map of Thailand Burma Border Refugee Camps



Source: Thailand Burma Border Consortium (2008) <http://www.tbbc.org>

## Executive Summary

University Neighborhood Partners (UNP) facilitates and supports campus-community partnerships with ethnically and culturally rich communities on the Salt Lake City west side. Local residents come together with faculty, students and community partners to address the barriers of race, ethnicity, religion, political viewpoints and geography that can interrupt the journey to higher education. As a result, building reciprocal relationships among educators, organizations and community members are focused on multiple perspectives that reflect the historical and cultural experiences of families and the knowledge that exists within communities. As new populations join the community, the richness of these experiences and the knowledge generated expands.

This report is the product of field study conducted in February 2008 by an interdisciplinary group of University of Utah faculty and staff and community partners who wanted to understand more about the Karen and Burmese populations resettling in Utah. While many of the new arrivals were originally from Burma (Myanmar), they are coming to Utah after extended periods (up to 20 years) of living in refugee camps on the Thailand/Burma (Myanmar) border. Our interest in this field study project was stimulated by our direct work with families at the UNP/Hartland Partnership Center, a community-capacity building partnership located at an apartment complex on Salt Lake City's west side and home to over 1500 residents from all over the world. Simultaneously, our colleagues from local social service agencies and schools contacted UNP seeking information that would assist them with providing services and education to these new-arriving families. We realized that this was an opportunity to be proactive and to learn from the many organizations, individuals and families who are currently working and living in camps on the Thailand/Burma border.

The main objectives of the field study project were to:

- gain knowledge on refugee camps, refugee populations, and their circumstances along the Thailand/Burma border area.
- understand the connections between where the resettlement process begins and where it ends, in other words, between the past and the present of the refugee experience.
- gather information useful to university and community partners currently engaged with Karen and Burmese families in Utah.
- visit Mae La Camp (this is particularly significant because it is a home for many Karen and Burmese refugees resettled in Utah)
- establish contact with specific families living in Mae La camp and on the border who have relatives resettled in Utah and deliver letters and pictures from family members (a physical connection between families in Utah and Thailand).

The knowledge gained from this project comes from interviews and focus group meetings with 22 organizations located in Bangkok, Mae Sot and the Mae La refugee camp. The organizations included international, non-governmental and community-based groups (see Appendix A) directly involved with refugee and migrant populations along the border area. Some information was also obtained from websites, reports, and brochures. In addition, the study group met with individuals and families living in Mae La Camp and along the border, who provided insights and stories about their experiences leaving their country and living in the camps as well as their thoughts regarding resettlement. However, due to the limited resources and the short duration of the research, the findings of this report may reflect only some of the circumstances of the refugees from Burma. Also, this report intends to address the multiple views of different groups and organizations and does not represent the opinions of any particular group.

This field study project was stimulated by direct work with families at the UNP/Hartland Partnership Center. Simultaneously, our colleagues from local social service agencies and schools contacted UNP seeking information that would assist them with providing services and education to these new arriving families.

Some of the themes that emerged from the field study research include the multiple strengths of the families living along the Thailand Burma border; a deep commitment of the Karen populations to their culture and history; and the multiplicity of cultures and languages living together along the border.

The report begins with an introduction of refugees from Burma, currently living in Utah, followed by the primary themes that illustrate the circumstances of refugees along the border areas including: Who are refugees; Views on resettlement; Perception on diverse groups within the refugee community. Additionally, the report provides content on educational programs and social services relevant to resettlement organizations, schools and social service providers working with the Karen and Burmese populations in Utah.

While the outcomes of this study are ongoing, the report provides a summary of the outcomes and developments to date, (See Impact of Field Research), as well as, projected projects and partnerships that are a result of the UNP/Thai-Burma field study project. The content of this report is enriched by narratives from individuals who have gone through refugee experiences and are now living in Utah. Similarly, the study group has provided personal reflections of their experiences and learning at the Thai-Burma border.

Throughout the field investigation, the study group members found much diversity within diversity, at the same time, some persistent themes emerged and remain as focal points of our learning, they include:

- the multiple strengths of the families living in Mae La Camp and the border area;
- the lack of adequate food, resources, and services needed for the people living in Mae La, and the border areas;
- how residents in Mae La govern and care for their communities;
- a long history of fleeing from conflict and human rights violations;
- multilingual populations;
- mixed feeling and diverse perspectives regarding resettlement;
- education and its relationship to resettlement and "brain drain" in the camps and along the border;
- a deep commitment of the Karen populations to their culture and history;
- an overwhelming desire of the Karen populations (both in camps and in resettled countries) to preserve their cultural identity, language and customs;
- a deep commitment to family and extended family;
- multiple communities of diverse cultures and faiths living in the camps and along the border and
- a strong desire to learn.

In conclusion, this report represents only the first stage of our learning and partnerships, since our journey is just and the communities have much more to share.



Don and Kathy Pedersen

Spending time with some of the Karen community-based organizations, especially the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) and the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) will have a lasting impact. Hearing the stories of persecution and abuse of the Karen people, including rape, murder, torture and forced labor by the Burmese military regime stirs emotion and calls one to action. Finding a clinical provider similar to the US Physician Assistant (PA) was indeed both a surprise and a pleasure. [To begin to understand that the Burmese "Medic" was also born out of a need to extend care to the underserved.] Much like military corpsmen and medics garnering advanced education to become PAs in the US, Burmese citizens are being trained at Dr. Cynthia Maung's Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sot to extend care to over a half million displaced Karen people along the Thai/Burma border. Many cross back into Burma as "BackPack" medics to deliver care at great personal risk—truly an unselfish act of love for their people—a people in exile.

## Recent Arrival of Refugees from Burma in Utah

### Overview

About 500 refugees from Burma have resettled in Utah as of March 2008. It is expected that the group will be the largest caseload for resettlement agencies in Utah for 2008.

The federally-funded U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program began receiving a large number of Karen and Burmese refugee groups from camps in Thailand in 2005. For the fiscal year 2007 alone, the program admitted 13,896 individuals (Department of State, 2008). According to the Refugee Services Office, a Utah state government entity, about 500 refugees from Burma have resettled in Utah as of March 2008. Considering the fact that only 25 Burmese refugees resettled in Utah between year 2000 and 2005 (Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2008), it is clear that the Utah community is receiving this new population on a much higher rate. It is expected that the group will be the largest caseload for resettlement agencies in Utah for 2008.

Although the ethnic compositions of Burmese refugees in Utah are not known, Barron et al. (2007) reports three ethnic groups as major populations resettling in the U.S.: the Burmans, the Karen and their various subgroups, and the Chin. The Burmans comprise nearly 70 percent of the population of Burma. They predominantly reside in urban areas and are mostly Buddhists. Their mother tongue is Burmese. The Burmans with refugee experience can be democracy supporters who suffered repression from the current military government of Burma. The Karen is one of the ethnic minority groups in Burma. Estimates of Karen population varies widely according to different sources, from 5 percent to 45 percent of the population of Burma. About 70 percent of Karen people live in rural areas, many in a section of Burma called the Karen State. There are Christians, Buddhists and Animists among them. They speak the Karen language, which has two major dialects, Sgaw and Pwo. The Karen have a long history of struggle to establish their self-determination against Burma's military government. They cooperated with the British during its colonial rule of Burma and fought against the Japanese during the World War II. Although the British promised the Karen people their autonomy, it was never realized when Burma achieved independence in 1948. After General Ne Win seized power in a 1962 coup and began leading a military-dominant government, he intensified prosecution against ethnic minority groups, including the Karen. While the Karen resettling in the U.S. are from refugee camps in Thailand, the Chin are mostly resettling from Malaysia where they seek temporary asylum as illegal migrants. The Chin are originally from the Chin State in Burma and are comprised of related people who speak 20 to 25 languages. According to Barron et al. (2007), the majority of Chin refugees resettling in the U.S. belong to the Hakha Chin, the group speaking Hakha language, and are predominantly Christians. The Burmese military government also oppresses the Chin because of their support for democratic government, religious freedoms and ethnicity. Besides these groups, Utah is also receiving Burmese Muslims who are mostly from the Karen State in Burma. Their native language is Burmese.

### Resettlement stories

Upon our return from the field research trip to Thailand, we conducted interviews with some individuals from Mae La camp who are now resettling in Salt Lake City about their refugee experiences and new life in the U.S. This was partly a collaborative work with Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) / International Rescue Committee (IRC) based on the Thailand/Burma border, who operates the resettlement process in the area. These interviews will be used in their information campaign in refugee camps to educate those who are considering resettling in the U.S. about the program. This section provides a few stories from these interviews, recognizing that listening to people's own voice is the best way to understand their experiences.



The Burmese government wants a unified country – not a diverse country. Almost all ethnicities have no leadership at all – leaders have gone away – arrested, in prison, in camps, displaced to another country. A staff member of a Karen refugee group

#### Mr. Zu Li: Burmese, Muslim, 59 years old

Interviews reflect verbatim discussions with individuals:

Please tell us about your life before coming to America.

I escaped to Thailand because my village in Burma had become a battlefield for the Burmese military and the Karen fighters. Houses and mosques were all burnt by the Burmese government's bombs. We knew that we would get killed if we stayed there. We walked for eight days in the mountain with children. We were hungry, scared and tired. After we arrived in Thailand, we first lived in Bo No Camp for 11 years. One of my children was born there. Then we moved to Mae La camp and stayed there for 13 years. I was a trader of cattle. I did this job with my cousins. I liked it very much.

Why did you decide to come to America?

Because America is a good country. It has a good government. No police receive bribe here. There was no opportunity in Burma and Thailand. No education. No passport.

Please tell me about your experience in America so far.

I came to America on September 23, 2007 with my wife and a son. My daughter and her husband first came to Utah with their children. We came two months later. When we arrived in America people from IRC were waiting at the airport. We got an apartment. The money came from the government soon. After my son started working at a hotel, we received less money from the government. They said we earned too much money. Now the government pays us for taking care of three children of our friend and relatives. We did not have to pay for the apartment for the first four months but now we pay rent every month. I like America because people from different countries and religions are living together like brothers. I don't have worries here.

## Interviews with former Mae La camp residents now resettled in Salt Lake City help resettlement agencies aid those considering resettlement.

What is your typical day like?

Everyday I wake up at six in the morning. I pray. I drink coffee. At 8:30 a.m. I go to the English class at IRC by bus. I go everywhere by bus, and that's good. Sometimes IRC gives me a ride to the class. I don't work because I am old. Then I come home by noon. I eat lunch at 1:00 p.m. I chew betel nut after the meal. My wife takes care of the children of the friends and relatives who work during the day. So there are many children at my apartment. I spend an evening watching Burmese Karaoke, TV drama and movies on DVD that are sent from families in Thailand. We can eat the same food that we ate in Thailand. We buy food at a Halal meat shop and a Thai food market in Salt Lake City.

Do you practice your religion here?

Yes. I go to mosque every Friday. People from the mosque pick me up by car and drive me there. I make friends there. They help me. They tell me where to go for certain things such as the Halal market. What do you miss the most?

I miss home when I see the scenery of Burma and Thailand in the Burmese DVD's. I miss talking to my friends. I knew many people in the camp community and had good connections with them. Do you have any plans for the future?

I want to go to a driving school. Also, I hope to rent a house when we finish the lease of this apartment.

A Karen male, Christian, 42 years old

Can you tell me about your life before coming to Thailand?

I was born in the Delta region of Burma in 1966. My father was a merchant. He went to Thailand to buy products and sold them in Burma. As he often traveled the border area where the Karen freedom fighters were based, the Burmese military suspected his affiliation with them, and therefore, he was arrested and imprisoned. So all of my brothers had to work to support the family. I was once forced to work as a porter for the Burmese military for a month. I had to pull a cart that was full of heavy military supplies. Like an ox. It was not a human's job. Then I got sick and suffered a high fever. I could not work anymore, and I decided to escape. I was 17 years old and single then. I walked through the jungle by myself with a high fever. I was lucky that the Karen freedom fighters helped me, gave me medicine and directed the way to Thailand.

How was your life in Thailand?

I lived in the first camp from 1984 until 1995. There were too many difficulties. I worked all kinds of labor jobs outside of the camp. Because the period of labor jobs is usually short, I had to take whatever jobs were available. I met my wife when I was working outside of the camp. She was also coming to work from a different camp. She moved to my camp, and our children were born there. When our camp was attacked in 1995, UNHCR relocated us to Mae La camp. We lived in Mae La camp from 1995 until 2007.

Why did you decide to resettle in America?

Because there were too many difficulties in our life in refugee camps. There was no freedom. People cannot travel freely. It's difficult to get jobs. We also want better education for our children. Although some courses are available after graduating from high school, there is no higher education opportunity like colleges in camps. There are not enough job opportunities for young people who completed education except becoming camp leaders and health workers. Access to computers is limited. People cannot improve themselves.

Can you tell me about your experience in America so far?

I don't know about other people, but I think I am doing OK. I came with my wife and children in the summer of 2007. When we arrived here we didn't know how to enroll our children in schools. Our

caseworker did not care about us. The caseworker visited us but stayed only for one minute and left. There were also health problems. No one took us to the immunization appointments. My wife had to go to a medical appointment, but no one showed up to take us. So my wife and I went by ourselves. At the hospital reception they gave us documents to fill out, but we didn't understand what they were about. So we went back home. There is a center which helps refugees in my apartment complex. A Karen woman from the center helped us. We began going to the center and became friends with people there.

How are you coping with English?

I think our English skill is improving and can communicate a little without translators. We go to ESL classes twice a week. But we sometimes miss the class because we have conflicts with work hours. I think our English will get better if we keep on speaking with more people. In ESL classes teachers speak slowly and clearly, but people usually speak very fast. It sounds like 'blah blah blah...'

How about food?

Before coming here we thought we could not get Asian food in America. In fact, we can cook and eat our food here.

Do you work now?

My wife and I started working two months after resettling in America. The resettlement agency helped find the jobs for us. Considering the living expenses, I want a job with a higher wage. My sons also work from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., and go to school from 6:00 p.m. to 9 p.m.

What do you like and dislike about America?

We have freedom in America. We can travel without getting arrested. Also, it is easy to get help here. When we go to a supermarket and don't understand English, people help you. I don't see things that I don't like about America. Being punctual for appointments may be hard for some people. I take difficulties as learning opportunities. We need to struggle at first in this new country.

Can you practice your religion here?

We don't have our church here. We once visited a church, but it was different from ours. With other Karen Christians, we regularly arrange occasions for prayer to live in peace. We are trying.

Any message for people in refugee camps who consider resettling in America?

When we look at the situations of Burma and refugee camps, there are many difficulties. If you want to work and are willing to struggle, you can come to America. If you are lazy and do not want to work, don't come. Once stepping into a new country, everyone has difficulties. We just have to try.

A Karen couple with five children, Buddhist

Please tell me about your life before coming to Thailand.

Husband: I was born in a village in the Karen State in Burma. I didn't go to school because of the civil war. I helped my parents farm. The Burmese military often came in and out of my village. I escaped the village by myself because I didn't want to work as a porter for the military. My friend worked as a porter and died. He could have starved to death, but we don't really know how he died. The military just abandons porters when they cannot work. I walked through a jungle to get to Thailand. I was about 15 years old then.

Wife: The Burmese military often attacked my village, too. The last attack was very serious, and my family escaped with other villagers. I was about 10 years old then.

Husband: When I arrived in Thailand my first job was to cut timber. I had relatives in Thailand and they brought me to a refugee camp.

Wife: There was no refugee camp when I arrived in Thailand. We got settled in a camp after a year. I met my husband there. People usually want to get married to hard workers. Two of our children were born in the camp. We moved to Mae La camp when the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army attacked

We chose America because the process of resettlement application was easier than other countries. Also, OPE told us that there are jobs available for illiterate and uneducated people in America. I was not worried about coming to America. I was just happy.

Karen family



It is estimated that two million Burmese citizens have fled to Thailand. However, these individuals are allowed to stay legally in the country only if they are registered with the government's Provincial Advisory Board. The registration in 2005 recognized 137,859 individuals in refugee camps in the border area.

the camp. My husband worked as a day laborer, and I stayed home to raise children. We lived in the Mae La camp from 1995 until 2007.

What made you decided to come to America?

Wife: Living in refugee camps does not give you job opportunities. You cannot leave camps. We chose America because the process of resettlement application was easier than some other countries. Also, OPE told us that there are jobs available for illiterate and uneducated people in America. I was not worried about coming to America. I was just happy.

How was your experience after arriving in America?

Husband: There were more difficulties and troubles at first. English was a big problem. We could not read what was written in our mail, and could not tell whether it was important or not. We started working two months after we had arrived in America. Our caseworker found the job for us. We sort clothes and pack them at a donation center.

Wife: We are happy with this job, but it lasts only for one year. Finding a job will be a big problem because we cannot speak English. We cannot fill out job applications by ourselves.

How are your children doing?

Wife: I think our children are doing fine at school because they look happy every day. It is difficult for us to attend parent-teacher meetings at schools because we don't speak English.

How is your experience in American food?

Wife: We don't eat American food at home. There are Asian supermarkets here. We can eat what we used to eat.

Do you like the weather here?

Husband: The weather is very different from Thailand. It's terrible. The length of day changes. Sometimes it gets dark early.

What was your biggest challenge, and how do you cope with it?

Wife: First is the language skill. We take ESL classes one hour a day at work. There are other English classes available, but we are too tired to study after work. I think it takes many years to overcome this challenge. Second is about family. You don't have time to take care of your children because both parents have to work to pay rent. You cannot leave children at home by themselves, or you will be arrested.

What do you like and dislike about America?

Husband: We have freedom. We can travel everywhere without being arrested by police.

Wife: My children do not like American food provided at school lunch.

Can you practice your religion here?

Husband: We are Buddhist. We want to practice here but have not been able to practice so far.

What do you miss the most?

Both: We missed home very much when we just arrived in America. It's getting better now. We miss our land, house and garden. We also miss fun activities and joking around with friends. Our life here is all about going to work and coming home every day. We go to work at 7:00 a.m. and come home at 4:00 p.m. The food tasted better in Mae La camp. We used to grow vegetables in the garden without using chemicals. We didn't use a refrigerator. Meat was fresh. We miss not having to worry about paying the apartment rent.

How do you support each other in your community?

Wife: We call each other and talk. It is hard to live in America without doing so.

What would you recommend to those who are still deciding to resettle in America?

Wife: It is up to them. But life can be difficult, especially for a big family like us. You can call friends here for help, but everyone is busy. You will face problems, especially if you are not educated and do not speak English.



We still have hope for the future. Thailand has not said they will drive us out. A staff member of a Karen refugee organization

### 'Refugees' from Burma in the Border Area-Who Are They?

Mae Sot is a small yet lively town located in Thailand three miles away from the border with Burma. The Moei River runs along the border. The "Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge" connects Mae Sot with Myawaddy, a Burmese town in the Karen State across the river. Because of its location, the population of Mae Sot is very diverse. Sixty percent of the population is estimated to be non-Thai and predominantly Burmese. You can find many Burmese women wearing "thanaka", a Burmese traditional cosmetic paste made from groundwood that they put on their faces. You can also see Burmese Muslim women wearing different kinds of headscarves. Some people have lighter skin, and others have darker skin. Burmese vendors are selling Burmese music CDs and books. We saw patients, health workers and international volunteers while visiting the Mae Tao Clinic for Burmese migrants, and a school for migrant children. Furthermore, there are people from Burma who live in refugee camps within one hour distance from Mae Sot. As we encountered different groups of people from Burma, questions arose: Who are 'refugees' in the camps? What are the differences between those who live in refugee camps and those who live outside? Who becomes a 'refugee' in the border area and how? Who is eligible for third country resettlement? The answers to these questions will be explored in the following sections.

#### Officially registered populations: legal camp residents

"The Thai government has the power to determine who the 'refugees' are." –UNHCR

Thailand has been providing asylum to those who escaped from Burma over the last three decades. It is estimated that two million Burmese citizens have fled to Thailand (Refugees International, 2007). However, these individuals are allowed to stay legally in the country only if they are registered with the government's Provincial Advisory Board. The registration in 2005 recognized 137,859 individuals in refugee camps in the border area (TBBC, 2007). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) staff, UNHCR can determine refugee status only for individuals who are registered with the Thai government.

The estimated number of undocumented individuals in Mae La camp is between 2,000 and 9,000.

I feel like an animal because I can't go out. Not being able to leave (the camp) creates narrow-mindedness, and this is our problem. We don't have knowledge. A woman in Mae La camp



Nevertheless, the Thai government does not officially recognize those who are registered and received asylum as 'refugees' while they are widely regarded as 'refugees' by NGOs and international organizations. The Thai authority formally replaced the word 'refugee' with the term "people fleeing from fighting" (Sangkhawan). This situation is caused by the fact that Thailand is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol. It means that the government is not obliged to meet protection standards of refugees set by these international legal frameworks, such as granting freedom of movement, the right to work and accessibility to travel documents. Therefore, the registered populations can neither receive protection fully as refugees nor legally integrate into Thai society, although they have been living in camps for more than 20 years.

On many occasions we heard that the registration issues are negatively affecting the quality of life at Mae La. For example, although food rations are provided to the registered populations in camps, and income generation is prohibited for camp presidents, some people actually do work outside of camps to make a better living. They work mostly as day laborers. Since traveling is strictly controlled, they can get arrested and imprisoned or deported if police find them outside of the camps. According to the leaders in Mae La camp, there are two methods of deportation: one is "under the bridge", meaning they can come back to Thailand on the same day by crossing the Moei River if they could make arrangement with the authority; and the other is "over the bridge" meaning officially handed to the Burmese authority. The latter can result in imprisonment and even death.

The Thai authorities officially refer to refugee camps as "temporary shelters," therefore, people can use only temporary materials such as bamboo and leaves for building houses in camps. Houses are usually rebuilt every two to three years.



#### Non-registered populations: undocumented camp residents

"Refugee camps are receiving more people after the recent political demonstration in Burma. They are not registered, but you cannot stop them coming to camps." –A Karen organization

Not all of those who crossed the border have opportunities to receive registration with the Thai government. Registrations are held sporadically. Most recently, the government ceased registration in 2005, and currently does not recognize asylum for anyone who arrived after that. This causes undocumented populations in camps. According to different international organizations and NGOs, the estimated number of undocumented individuals in Mae La camp is between 2,000 and 9,000.

A Karen organization points out that the number of undocumented people increased markedly particularly after the resettlement program began. A large number of people left camps for resettlement opportunities in new countries, and their houses became available for others. We also heard that some people sell their houses to newcomers. An NGO staff member explained that there are people who act as brokers to help undocumented newcomers move into camps.

While many, mostly Karen people, continue to flee to refugee camps because their villages have been attacked and burnt by the Burmese military, some come for economic reasons. According to an NGO worker, refugee camps act as hubs for migrant labor. Some people in the camps make connections between Thai employers who want cheap labor and those from Burma who want to work. As a Karen organization staff member put it, refugee camp presidents have a better life than some people in Burma. For example, individuals with a disability can be neglected in Burma, while the camps have prosthetic workshops that provide prosthetic equipment to the residents. Also, people come to camps because they hear about the possibility of resettlement in third countries.

Increases in unregistered populations in camps causes many difficulties for the camp administrations including food distribution. An NGO staff member explained that the amount of food available for distribution is based on the official number of camp residents, which is decreasing due to the resettlement program. However, this is not an accurate representation, since it does not include non-registered individuals in camps. Consequently, they do not have enough food to feed all the people.

When I heard an NGO director talk about food shortages in the camps, my heart ached for justice, equality and peace.

Kim Schmit

### Non-registered populations: migrant workers

"We provide ID cards to our students. They will prevent the students from being arrested by Thai police. But, we sometimes have to go to police to pick our students up when they are arrested."

—A staff member of a school for migrant children from Burma

We chose to come to America because the application process for resettlement was easier than other countries. A Karen family resettled in Utah

The sporadic registration in camps causes large groups of potential refugees to remain undocumented and to live outside of refugee camps without protection. Others live outside of refugee camps by choice in order to avoid restrictions on traveling and getting jobs. Since returning to Burma is not an option for most of them, they stay and work in the border area illegally. They are commonly called "migrant workers". This term is generally used in the border area to describe people who fled from Burma and are living outside of camps. It is said that Burmese citizens make up approximately 80 percent of all the migrant workers in Thailand (Amnesty International, 2005).

Migrant workers often live in economic vulnerable conditions. According to an international organization staff member, the minimum daily wage for migrant workers from Burma is 40-60 Baht while for Thai people, it is 190 Baht (6 USD)<sup>5</sup>. A Karen organization mentioned that those who are in refugee camps are doing better than the migrant workers are. Although they may have fled from Burma for the same reason as those residing in the camps, migrant workers can be arrested and deported at any time.

The team visited several organizations that provide support for migrant worker populations in the border area. For example, the Mae Tao Clinic<sup>6</sup> offers free health care for migrant workers from Burma. As one clinic staff member put it, 52 percent of the patients are migrant workers living in Thailand, and the other 48 percent cross the border to visit the clinic because there are few or no medical facilities in rural areas in Burma. Patient education is one of the major services of the clinic. One can see a variety of educational materials not only on health but also on human rights awareness for migrant workers<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, the clinic runs the Children's Development Centre, a school for migrant workers' children aged 2 to 16. One of the teachers explained that migrant parents send their children to the school because they often cannot afford Thai school tuition, and they prefer that their children learn in an environment where Burmese and Karen ethnic identities are valued. The school also provides accommodation for child laborers who are orphans, and the Mae Tao Clinic provides counseling for them if needed.

### Selection of people for the resettlement program

According to the UNHCR, there are three long-term solutions for refugees: First, to voluntarily repatriate to their home countries; second, to integrate into the society of the host country; and third, to resettle in safe third countries when neither of the first two options are possible. Because the refugees from Burma can neither integrate into Thai society nor return to Burma in the near future, the UNHCR considers that resettlement is the last option left to "break the cycle of warehousing" in the refugee camps.

The resettlement program is open to those who are registered with the Thai government, although non-registered people may also be considered when they need to reunify with other family members already resettled in third countries. Consequently, applicants are usually from the populations living in refugee camps. An NGO staff member explained that undocumented people living in camps often come to apply for resettlement program but are rejected.



According to UNHCR, there are three long-term solutions for refugees: First, to voluntarily repatriate to their home countries; second, to integrate into the society of the host country; and third, to resettle in safe third countries when neither of the first two options are possible.

Individuals have to go through numerous screening processes for the resettlement program. The following explains the processes for the U.S. program described by the Overseas Processing Entity (OPE)<sup>8</sup>.

When the resettlement program opens, there is an information campaign held in the camps. It provides information on life in the U.S. through theatrical plays and newsletters. Those who are interested in resettlement report to the UNHCR representative in the camps, who refer them to the U.S. authority. In the case of the United States the International Rescue Committee (IRC) contracts with the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration and acts as the OPE. OPE conducts eligibility prescreenings of applicants, and submits case files to the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Then DHS interviews the applicants and determines individual refugee eligibility for resettlement. All of the above processes are usually held in refugee camps. After DHS decisions are made, which can take up to three months, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) conducts health screenings<sup>9</sup>. Applicants from Mae La camp receive the screenings in the hospital in Mae Sot. According to an international organization staff member, chest-related diseases such as tuberculosis are the major health concern of the U.S. authorities. Countries with a socialized medicine system such as Australia have stricter health requirements than the United States. In terms of health screenings, 0.01 percent of the applicants are denied entrance to the U.S., mainly due to drug abuse and mental problems. Refugees are required to depart within three months after the health screening. The whole process from the UNHCR referral to departure usually takes about seven months but can take up to one year.

There are various obstacles in the processes. According to OPE staff, they try to keep the family member together but they encounter difficulties when adopted children do not have legal documents. Additional problems occur when applicants have the same last name as the general of the Karen National Union (KNU), an armed group fighting for their autonomy against the Burmese government since 1948. Previously, the KNU was identified as a terrorist group by the U.S. government. Although the Department of State waived this restriction on the KNU supporters in 2006 and allowed the Karen group to resettle in the country, it still limits the resettlement of the former Karen army combatants.



Chiho Nakamura Lee

One of the highlights of this field trip was to meet the relatives of the Burmese family I had befriended in Utah. Visiting a house where the family used to live in the camp, being offered endless rice and curry by their relatives, informing them how their family is thriving in Utah, and showing the family's pictures from Utah produced moments filled with laughter, tears, happiness and sadness. Although physical separation from the home may be an inescapable part of the refugee experience, I believe maintaining a connection with the community of origin will give you strength to live in a new environment. This trip reminded me that one of our roles in the resettling country is to support this connection and also to create a new community where people can feel like they belong.

We work to correct obscure rumors on resettlement.  
OPE staff member



## Views on Resettlement

It is estimated that 14,636 individuals left camps in Thailand for resettling countries in 2007, and between 17,000 to 19,000 people will be resettled in 2008 (TBBC, 2007). Considering that there are nearly 138,000 registered individuals living in camps, they are losing more than 10 percent of their population every year. Both here and abroad, it is clear that introduction of the resettlement program is having a significant impact on the refugee community. It is viewed differently by various stakeholders such as international organizations, NGOs and people going through the refugee experience. The following sections will look at how these stakeholders see resettlement, and how it is affecting the communities of refugee camps and the border area.

### Fears and rumors

"There are many reasons why residents of Mae La camp don't want to go to the U.S. They worry that they don't know English and that they lack education." –An international organization staff member

According to an international organization staff member, refugees have fears of resettlement; especially the non-educated. Some people are not mentally prepared. Others worry when they hear that they will have to work and will only receive assistance for a short period of time. They wonder how much support they will get, whether they can make money if they don't speak English, and whether a big family will be able to live together.

Due to the widespread use of cell phones in refugee camps, people are able to communicate with family members who are resettled abroad and frequently hear about their resettlement experience. Not enough contact with resettlement agency caseworkers is one of the common stories. Some of those who get resettled in new countries want to come back to the camps because they are not likely to accomplish their dream. For example, ex-military officers who were at high ranks now work as

dishwashers. Young people realize that they do not have enough educational skills to go to college. A Karen organization worker shared with us what she heard from the ones resettled in Utah: people do not have enough money for rent, finish working at 10 p.m. and walk home for two hours in the snow because there is no bus service. An opinion expressed by an international organization staff member was that more attention is given to those who fall through cracks than to those who have successful experiences.

Also, stories can be sometimes conveyed with distortion. On several occasions we heard that there are odd rumors on resettlement such as: old people are taken to the hospital and their organs are harvested; young Karen are forced to join the military and will have to fight in Iraq; refugees are eaten by fish and processed into cans.

IOM and IRC conduct information campaigns in refugee camps to tackle rumors about resettlement. They provide a monthly newsletter, they do a show that educates residents about the resettlement, and opportunities to answer questions. During our trip, our group was asked to collect resettlement stories from families in Utah that could then be used to educate refugees in the camp.

### "Brain Drain" for the refugee community

"Jumbo resettlement impact. No teacher, no medic and no health worker."  
–A secretary general of a Karen organization

People escaped from Burma and began building their own communities along the border more than 20 years ago, which eventually became the present refugee camps. They built their own houses, trained people to serve the community, and created a self-sufficient system with help from NGOs. Therefore, concerns regarding negative impacts of resettlement on the refugee community are expressed especially among NGOs, organizations run by the refugee community members and leaders. They describe that camps are losing valuable human resources: the young, educated and skilled who are engaged in camp management, education, health and social services – the camp leaders, medical staff and teachers. It is estimated that around 75 percent of all skilled workers and leaders had departed by the end of the year 2007 (TBBC, 2007). We often heard from Karen organizations and NGOs that resettling countries prefer to take educated people, while widows, the elderly and other less skilled individuals are left in the camps.

This "brain drain" situation frustrates people who provide training for camp residents. For instance, according to an NGO staff member, it takes four years to train a medic. Leaders of Mae La camp explained that 2/3 of 650 teachers are leaving or have already left the camp. This causes a problem as they often have to replace departing teachers with untrained people who speak only Burmese, though most of the students speak Karen. There are higher education programs, including teacher preparation and leadership training for young people who finish high schools in Mae La camp. However, dropout rates for these programs is now up to 50 percent due to resettlement.

International organizations that primarily operate resettlement programs are aware of this "brain drain" concern raised by NGOs and the refugee community. In order to deal with the situation, comprehensive research has been conducted to evaluate the impact of resettlement on the remaining camp population.<sup>10</sup> Also, an IOM worker suggests training local Thai people instead of camp residents to secure sustainable human resources. As one international organization staff member puts it "the refugee community has to make it worthwhile for people to stay in camps if they do not want people to leave."

We do not worry about those who are resettling. We worry about those who are staying. Because they need to survive fear, separation, starvation and loss.

A Karen organization staff member

After working in the Thailand/Burma border town of Mae Sot for over a week, to have a high ranking official of the Karen National Union (KNU) resistance movement murdered by the Burmese military regime on the day we left for Bangkok was indeed a shock, bringing the plight of the Karen people very close and personal. Don and Kathy Pedersen



### Implication for Karen movement

“Asa Karen I want to make a suggestion. Please help Karen people to maintain their culture, language and national identity in the resettling countries. They might return to their homeland someday.”  
—A leader of a Karen organization

On several occasions we heard from various organizations that resettlement is “the death nail of the Karen movement.” The resettlement program is essentially separating Karen people who have been collectively fighting for their autonomy against the Burmese military governments since the country’s decolonization in 1948. As an international organization staff member puts it, resettlement can be seen as a betrayal of the Karen cause in their community. Resettlement is, therefore, a difficult decision for many patriotic Karen individuals.

Nevertheless, leaders of the Karen community, as well as NGOs, expressed that resettlement is a positive solution to the protracted refugee situation. According to Karen organization staff members, they will look for the future in other places when the future is not at home. In this regard, they said that young people are active, hopeful and have aspirations; however, there is no hope for them in camps because they are isolated and regulated.

At the same time, Karen leaders want to ensure that all the Karen people remember their political struggle as they are resettling into different parts of the world. They hope that people gain skills in resettling countries and someday return to help the ones who remain. In fact, the Karen community held a “Karen Unity Seminar” in Mae Sot a week prior to our visit, where they invited Karen leaders including those who are resettling in third countries to discuss the future of the Karen movement. There were many circumstances on the trip when we felt that remaining camp presidents did not want to be “forgotten.” A Karen organization member told us that our visit demonstrated concern and sympathy for the Karen people, and indicated that they are not forgotten.

### Perceptions on Diverse Groups in the Refugee Community

The features of the refugee population are a mix of ethnicities, religions, cultures, traditions and ways of living—a virtual melting pot—very much like the United Nations, where getting agreements can be quite impossible. (Karen Refugee Committee)

According to a Karen organization, while the majority of camp presidents in the border area belong to the Karen ethnic group because of the geographical proximity to the Karen State, there are also other groups such as Burmese/Burman, Muslims, Karenni, Mon, Pa-Oh, Arakhine and Shan. According to TBBC (2006), 47 percent of Mae La camp residents are Christians, 38 percent are Buddhists, 13 percent are Muslims and 2 percent are Animists. On many occasions we heard from groups about characteristics and stereotypes of various ethnic or religious groups. The following section of this report will look at these perceptions, especially specific to the Karen people and Burmese Muslims.

Like the Karen, the Muslims love to learn, but their education is more geared towards business interests than the Karen, who love education for its own sake.

An international organization worker

### The Karen

We often heard from international organizations and NGOs that Karen people are passive and shy and are typically being humble. According to one international organization worker, Karen people who are resettled in new countries have problems because they often wait until someone comes to help them. The worker also explained that the protracted refugee situation creates a sense of dependency. In order to deal with the passivity, the cultural orientation includes assertiveness training in its curriculum to encourage people to be more proactive. For example, the major lesson of the employment class is how to present and “sell” themselves<sup>11</sup>.

In contrast, we also heard that the Karen people are very motivated especially about getting education. According to another international organization staff member, Karen often see themselves as uneducated if they are from rural areas. An NGO worker described that the Karen people have “buckets of motivation” even asking for candles to study at night in camps. However, one international organization worker mentioned that Karen are often unaware of how hard it will be to become a professional such as a doctor in spite of their “love” for education.

One of the common self-perceptions of Karen people is that they are survivors of oppression. One international organization worker explained that when Karen were asked what advantages they have over Americans, they answered “we know how to suffer.” Also, an organization staff member explained that, although the life in the U.S. can be difficult, it will no be “as bad as what we have experienced here.”

It was interesting to learn that there is a familiarity with “white” westerners among some Karen Christians. The American Baptist missionaries first converted Karen to Christianity in 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and the British worked closely with the Karen during its colonial rule in Burma. Staff members of a Karen organization explained that Karen feel partial to “white people” and they can “walk closely with them.” They also mentioned that “white people” are the ones who usually help the refugees in the border area, referring to the staff of international and relief organizations.

Burmese Muslims are known as being very entrepreneurial and are traders by tradition and may start their own businesses once they resettle.

As for the relationship between Karen and other ethnic groups, most of the international organizations, NGOs and Karen people themselves pointed out the tension between Karen and the Burman due to the historical relationship of the Karen as the oppressed and the Burman as the oppressor. According to an international organization worker, some Burmans may see Karen as “jungle people” and “people of war” and do not want to mingle with them. Conversely, Karen may view Burmans in refugee camps as spies and assassins hired by the Burmese authorities. We heard that Burman medics can be denied working in camps because of this stereotype. On many occasions, international and Karen organization explained that assigning Burman caseworkers for Karen people in resettling countries might cause problems.

According to an NGO worker, there is also a tension within the Karen population. A Buddhist faction in the Karen National Union (KNU), an armed group fighting for Karen independence, broke off and formed the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). The DKBA made a pact with the Burmese government and has been fighting against Christian-dominant KNU. The Mae La camp was attacked by the DKBA in 1998. In fact, the general secretary of the KNU was assassinated in Mae Sot during our stay in the town, and there was a speculation in newspapers that the DKBA was responsible because the assassin spoke the Karen language.

### The Burmese Muslims

The Burmese Muslims have distinct physical features, dress, culture and history relative to the Karen people. Their ancestors are originally from India and Bangladesh, so their facial features are similar to South Asians, including darker skin. We saw women wearing headscarves and men wearing small white caps and long beards. Most of those in refugee camps at the border area had lived in the Karen State prior to their fleeing to Thailand. For example, a Burmese Muslim man from the Mae La camp explained that his grandfather migrated from Bangladesh to Burma’s capital city for a better life. He was forced to move to the Karen State when the Burmese government expelled ethnic minorities from major cities. He married a Karen woman and settled in the Karen State until his village was attacked by the military.

On many occasions international organizations and NGOs described Burmese Muslims as proactive and assertive compared to the Karen people. An NGO worker explained that they are very entrepreneurial and are traders by tradition. According to a Karen person from the Mae La camp, all the shops in the camp are owned by Muslims. An international organization staff member predicts that they will likely to be looking to start their own business in resettling countries once they gain some capital.

Relationships between Karen and Burmese Muslims can be ambivalent. Both of these groups often describe the other as “friends” because they have always been neighbors in the Karen State, as well as in the refugee camps. On the other hand, Karen organization members emphasized the difference between the Karen and Muslims in religion and culture when we asked about their relationship with Muslims. They explained that there is no trouble even though ethnic groups live among themselves and are not used to being together. According to an NGO worker, Karen sometimes views Muslims as “Indians”, and there is distrust between these groups. The worker also suggested that Muslim case workers not be assigned to the Karen in resettling countries.

The relationship between the Karen and Burmese Muslims can be ambivalent. Although both of these groups often describe each other as “friends,” and they have been neighbors in the Karen State as well as in the refugee camps, an NGO worker said sometimes there is distrust between these groups.



Many individuals from the refugee community speak several languages fluently, giving the impression that people in this region are accustomed to living in a multilingual environment. For example, workers at the school and the clinic for migrants as well as refugees from Burma, typically speak Karen, Burmese, Thai and English.

### Service Specific Information

#### Literacy skills & languages: A multi-lingual environment

Fill in the blanks with the correct form of the verb: 3. 'study' They English, Burmese, and Karen language.  
–A question from the English Tenth Standard text book used in the refugee camp

#### Perception of languages

During our trip, we met many individuals from the refugee community who spoke several languages fluently. This gave us the impression that people are accustomed to living in a multilingual environment. For example, workers at the school and the clinic for migrants and refugees from Burma typically speak Karen, Burmese, Thai and English. Some Burmese Muslims speak not only Burmese because they have always lived close to Karen people in their home villages in the Karen State, but Karen as well as in refugee camps. Also, we met several elderly Karen in the camps who speak flawless English because they were educated under the British colonial rule. Students in the Mae La refugee camp schools learn Karen, Burmese, English and sometimes Thai in every grade, although it is not obligatory to attend school.

On many occasions we heard that the Karen community greatly values education. One of the reasons may be that they have been deprived of educational opportunities, especially those living in rural areas in Burma. The schools were once built by Christian missionaries in Karen villages in mid-1800s, but they were abolished by the military government. According to the Mae La camp leaders, having Karen ethnic names can make it difficult to access higher education. Also, the Burmese government has been implementing a firm policy to develop Burmese as the official language and to ban the teaching of ethnic minority languages, including Karen, in schools for more than 40 years. This is why Karen people who went to schools in urban areas in Burma often speak Burmese fluently. A staff member of

Learning language is widely viewed as an empowerment tool in the migrant and refugee communities both inside and outside of the camps. For example, a principal of a school for Burmese migrant children mentioned that they teach not only Burmese, Karen and English but also Thai language so that students can have access to Thai colleges.



a Karen organization explained that one of the reasons why there are many different dialects within the Karen language is that the Burmese government is attempting to split the group.

Learning language is also widely viewed as empowerment tools in the migrant and refugee communities both inside and outside of the camps. For example, a principal of a school for Burmese migrant children mentioned that they teach not only Burmese, Karen and English, but also Thai, so that students can have access to Thai colleges. The Mae Tao Clinic, a free clinic in Mae Sot for Burmese refugees and migrants, provides English and Thai language lessons in their health-worker-training program so that the staff can communicate with volunteers and visitors from all over the world. Also, refugee camps have English teacher-training programs for students who finish high school, as well as limited basic English classes for adults and English language classes each year of the youth academic

year. Conversations with school teachers and camp translators in the Mae La camp, revealed that there is currently a shortage of teachers in the camp due to resettlement.

Observation of Basic English Class run by ZOA Refugee Care —by Kim Schmit

Although limited, observations of and participation in a basic English class run by international NGO, ZOA Refugee Care (ZOA) provided valuable insight into the language learning programs available for adults in the refugee camps. Participants in the class included 24 adults, both male and female, and the instructor was a young male from Malaysia. It was his first day of teaching.

The classroom was made of concrete and bamboo and was large enough to accommodate all the students

comfortably. Each student had an individual chair, which were formed into a semicircle. At the front of the room hung a whiteboard, and there was a table pushed to the side. Each student had their own English learning textbook published by ZOA. An attached room served as the administrator's area, where teachers and coordinators prepared for class.

The class was one and a half hours long and consisted of a variety of teaching and learning methods. All of the instruction was done in English. While the teacher stood at the front of the room for the entire class, the students sat, stood and moved around.

The day's theme was focused on learning how to do basic introductions and how to greet someone new. With the teacher leading, the students read simple segments from the textbook and then followed along with a tape recording of the same material. Then the students did three different experiential learning exercises that allowed them to move around the room and practice their lessons. The final exercise was an interactive game that divided students into teams, with one member at a time racing to the whiteboard to fill in the missing letters of a vocabulary word that connected to the theme of the day.

While delivery of the class curriculum did feel rushed and disconnected, and the students and teacher appeared to struggle with the teaching and learning methods, there was also a great feeling of enthusiasm. Teacher and students were all engaged for the entire class period, and there was significant motivation and willingness to learn. Students supported one another through laughing, clapping, and working together to answer the teacher's questions.

Later conversations with instructors revealed that a recent camp survey had generated a waiting list of 100-200 people who were interested in taking English classes. They also spoke of the need to have further professional training to help them with their instruction, as most instructors are committed volunteers, often with no formal training. Lastly, they expressed the need for teaching volunteers to be long-term.

Observation of 10<sup>th</sup> grade English class in High School Number One, Mae La camp —by Kim Schmit

Reading is an essential part of a free and democratic society. —from page 49 of English instruction textbook

The 10<sup>th</sup> grade class was made up of approximately thirty boys and thirty girls. The girls were seated on one side of the room and the boys on the other. Desks consisted of long wooden benches and tables that were organized into rows. At the front of the room hung a large white board, and there was a teacher's desk. The larger room had a bamboo ceiling and walls, was partially open-air and was attached to the other classrooms.

Each student had a copy of the text, "English Tenth Standard,"<sup>12</sup> which is especially made for the students in the camps and written entirely in English. This text revealed a curriculum that utilizes English instruction as a medium for positive Karen identity development. Through additive measures, the English curriculum infused a strong appreciation and knowledge of western, industrialized culture with that of traditional Karen culture. The goal appeared for students to acquire English while developing an even stronger Karen cultural identity.

The female teacher, along with most teachers in the camps, was a young adult who lives in the camp and had advanced multilingual skills. During the course of the class, she continually walked around the room and up and down the aisles. The students stayed seated throughout the class, except when they rose in small groups to read aloud. The teacher utilized both English and Karen to work through

A recent camp survey generated a waiting list of 100-200 people who were interested in taking English classes. Most instructors are committed volunteers, often with no formal training.



One of the concerns expressed by Karen organizations for people resettling in new countries is that they might lose their identity as Karen.

the lesson. The teacher would begin a section of the book by reading aloud in English also. She would then go through the reading in Karen and follow-up with questions to the students in English, often clarifying in English. The students would respond in unison in English. The class moved at a steady pace and the students were diligent in their participation. Students asked no questions throughout the class.

The social service system in refugee camps has been developed over two decades of camp management.

We found it highly self-sufficient and sustainable. Service organizations are locally operated for camp residents by camp presidents themselves.

While the teaching methods were “traditional” and “teacher-centered”, with little opportunity for practicing individual speech production and experiential methods, the observation revealed a disciplined atmosphere focused on cultural and social enhancement in the context of English language learning.

Later conversations with translators, who were former students of the high school program, revealed their belief that the teacher-centered teaching methods used in the English classes are problematic because the methods mainly teach students to read, recite and simply respond to teachers, but not to generate speech in English.

### Cultural Preservation

Identity, language and culture are important in surviving among other people. –Karen Refugee Committee

Cultural preservation is highly valued among refugees and migrant populations in the border area. At the Children Development Centre (CDC) in Mae Sot, a school for migrant children from Burma, teachers encourage students from kindergarten to 11<sup>th</sup> grade to retain their cultural identities by teaching the Karen and Burmese languages and organizing various cultural events including Karen New Year. According to a school worker, parents choose this school because they want their children to be immersed in the Karen and Burmese environment. The reason parents also choose this school because Thai school tuition is too expensive.

The Karen Women’s Organization (KWO) is also involved in promoting and maintaining the Karen culture and custom through their income-generation projects for Karen women in refugee camps. Women learn traditional loom weaving and backstrap weaving, as well as designing Karen dresses, bags and wall hangings. These products are sold in camps and in towns, as well as on their website.<sup>13</sup>

One of the concerns expressed by Karen organizations for people resettling in new countries is that they might lose their identity as Karen. They advise resettling countries to support Karen people in retaining their culture. Mae La camp leaders recommend organizing Karen New Year celebrations and events involving cultural performance, dancing, music and dress. They also suggest that these events can be organized through social groups or churches for Karen Christians. According to staff members, a pastor organizes a gathering every Tuesday for the Karen community in Minnesota.

### Community-identified social services

“It is nice that people come from abroad to learn about our program in the camp. I want to know how you treat people with substance abuse problems in America?” –A supervisor of the Drug and Alcohol Recovery and Education (DARE) Network in Mae La camp



The garden in Mae La camp was enormous and located along the foothills. There were tracts of vegetables, including lettuce, coriander, long beans and Chinese kale.

The social service system in Mae La has been developed over two decades by camp management. We found it highly self-sufficient and sustainable. Services are mainly provided by organizations based in a camp community with support from NGOs. They are locally operated for camp residents by camp residents themselves.

For example, the Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR) offers support for the extremely vulnerable populations in Mae La camps such as orphans under the age of 18, the elderly and people with physical and mental disabilities. There are offices in each zone of the camp. According to a supervisor of the office, leaders in the community identify the individuals in need and refer them to COERR. They provide food as well as non-food items including medicine, clothing and hygiene kits. People with polio receive the special shoes they need. They also offer life skills lessons for children. COERR has 35 community social workers serving 1,846 clients in the Mae La camp. Social workers provide case work to individuals and visit their homes regularly to keep family information updated.

The social work supervisor expressed concerns about high case loads and a lack of resources. He also discussed some difficulties with convincing parents that it is important for their children to go to school and to attend regularly. As part of this discussion, social workers from Utah and Mae La brainstormed ideas and shared strategies.

COERR also supports a community garden by providing seeds and teaching gardening skills to camp residents. The former camp leader, David Saw Wah, originally began the Community Agriculture Nutrition project in order to provide work opportunities inside the camps and to improve community nutrition.<sup>14</sup> The garden in the Mae La camp was enormous and located along the foothills. There were tracts of vegetables, including lettuce, coriander, long beans and Chinese Kale. Camp presidents made the point that everything is organic and free from chemicals. They make their own compost and fish fertilizer. There is also a program for substance abuse treatment and prevention education provided

## The Mae La camp residents are often trained as medics because of the shortage of physicians in the region.

by the Drug and Alcohol Recovery and Education (DARE) Network. Treatment starts with intake and assessment by addiction workers, who verify the type of substance being abused, the history of abuse and physical condition of the patient.<sup>15</sup> Workers are camp residents who are trained in the camp by trainers from the nearby town of Mae Sariang. Currently there are five staff members in the Mae La camp. Individual and group counseling and physical exercise programs are also a part of the treatment. On average, it takes three months to detoxify. They use traditional methods of cleansing such as soaking hot baths infused with ginger and herbs.<sup>16</sup> According to a supervisor at the DARE office in the Mae La camp, camp leaders do not only refer clients to the program but also encourage camp residents to participate in DARE's education events. Residents are sometimes told that their food rations will be stopped if they do not participate in the events.

The training of medics is an integral part of the health care system in refugee camps. A hospital in Mae La camp is run by one supervising medic and an additional six to seven medics who are camp residents.



### Training and education as the core of health programs

Mission: To equip people with the skill and knowledge necessary to manage and address their own health problems, while working towards sustainable development through the promotion of primary health care.

–Back Pack Health Worker Team

#### Medics

The training of medics is an integral part of the health care system in refugee camps. Because of the shortage of physicians, members of the refugee community receive training to become medics and treat patients in hospitals and clinics. For example, a hospital in the Mae La camp is run by one supervising medic and the additional six to seven medics who are camp residents. Visiting doctors from NGOs, such as Aide Medicale International (AMI), provide support for the medics. Similarly, an NGO, "Doctors Without Borders" run the TB program in the camps. Patients with critical conditions may go to local Thai hospitals, although they often cannot afford treatment.

Medics also play important roles outside of the camps in the border area. The Mae Tao Clinic, located near the town of Mae Sot, provides free health services for displaced people from Burma, including migrants and refugees. The clinic was founded by Dr. Cynthia Maung, who is a Karen refugee herself. The clinic staff consists of five physicians, 140 medics and 100 support personnel. Moreover, every year about 100 new health workers receive training in areas such as nursing care, laboratory functions, maternal and child health, traditional birth attendants, basic eye care, and computer use and also attend English language classes. Dr. Maung is also a part of the training. Seven medics work in the clinic's surgical department and are supervised by a volunteer surgeon, who stays for six months a year to provide training for them.

Also, some of the medics who are trained at the Mae Tao Clinic work for Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT)<sup>17</sup>. The team goes into the armed conflict area in Burma and provides primary health care and education for displaced villagers who have no access to medical services. A trainer of BPHWT, who is a volunteer emergency room physician from the U.S., pointed out the risks for their health workers to be in Burma, including being imprisoned and/or shot by the Burmese military and injured by landmines in the border area. Seven workers have lost their lives since the program started.

According to Donald Pedersen, the Director of the University of Utah Physician Assistant Program (UPAP), the medics in the camps, the BPHWT medics, and the medics at the Mae Tao Clinic operate very much like U.S. Physician Assistants (PAs). They extend access to medical care to the vulnerable portion of Karen displaced population. The medics are educated to take patient histories, perform physical exams, make diagnoses, and initiate treatment plans, including the prescribing of medications and the performing of surgical procedures. Having observed them and having reviewed the curriculum utilized during their 2-3 years of training, Dr. Pedersen is convinced the medics are an analog to U.S. PAs.

#### The Mae Tao Clinic

Services at the Mae Tao Clinic are fairly extensive and quite impressive considering the budget Dr. Maung is working with; however facility conditions, including access to medical equipment, medications, and trained staff, are far below standards. The clinic has both outpatient and inpatient departments. A common case for outpatient care is an acute respiratory illness, while common diagnoses for inpatient care are malaria and anemia. The surgical department offers outpatient minor surgery and simple dental procedures, as well as inpatient emergency trauma and postoperative care. Most traumatic injuries are due to motorcycle accidents and landmines.

The Mae Tao Clinic's Reproductive Health Department provides routine prenatal care and emergency obstetrical care for pregnant women. Neonatal care and gynecological care are also available. According to a staff member, most newborns are premature and are referred to Mae Tao's Children Health Services. Children Health Services offers preventive care such as growth monitoring, nutritional assessments, supplementary feeding and immunization, as well as general acute care such as surgery and deworming. A clinic staff member mentioned that although the Thai government requires vaccinations for all the children, some mothers refuse because they believe children will get sick from them. In addition, there are laboratory services, including a blood bank, eye care and eye surgery services, prosthetic and rehabilitation services, malaria treatment, and HIV/AIDS prevention services.

Social services are also available at the clinic including, hospice care, elderly care, counseling and funeral services. According to a staff member the clinic pays the cost of funerals and cremations when surviving family members cannot afford it. There is a funeral ceremony space within the clinic site. During our visit, we saw a group of Buddhist monks praying for the family of the deceased in the ceremony space.

We were impressed that education is embedded in all aspects of health care services in the Mae Tao Clinic. Each patient receives health education individually. The clinic also has various community outreach programs: an HIV prevention program to train peer educators to educate migrant workers; sex education workshops for adolescents; and sex education training for migrant school teachers. A clinic worker explained that birth control pills are commonly recommended in teaching contraception; however, the clinic encourages the use of female condoms, especially for sex workers, because they

Medics can also work for the Back Pack Health Worker Team, which travels into the armed conflict area in Burma to provide primary health care and education to displaced villagers who have no access to medical services.

The ingenuity of the workers making prosthetic lower limbs was impressive, considering the circumstances but rehabilitation services fall far short of what we are accustomed to in the U.S.



can protect themselves voluntarily. According to the clinic worker, there are many patients who have abortions by themselves using traditional methods such as massaging of the abdomen, herbal medicines and the use of sticks. These methods are used because abortion is illegal in Thailand.

The clinic also has a resource center for its health workers and patients. Various materials on health and human rights education can be found in the clinic. For example, we saw brochures on the process for obtaining birth registration for migrant children, educational material focused on HIV/AIDS and STDs, and a booklet on the rights of migrant workers in Thailand. Most of them are written in Burmese and Karen.

#### Observation of Handicap International in Mae La camp —by Yda Smith

The Mae La camp is administratively divided into three zones: A, B and C. Each zone is further divided into five sections. Handicap International (HI) provides services within the Mae La camp. An office and classroom space is set up in Zone B. When we arrived several young adults were sitting on the floor writing in notebooks as part of a lesson. The physical therapist working with HI arrived and explained that they have a great need for education on how to provide therapy for children with cerebral palsy and adults with hemiplegia. They also need training in how to work with people with head injuries and spinal cord injuries. They have no occupational therapy services and would like volunteers to train their staff in this area.

In Zone C they have a workshop primarily used for making prosthetic lower limbs. They were working on a prosthesis while we were there but had difficulties making it properly. The men making it were trainees and were new replacements for the experienced workers who had left the camp for third country resettlement. In this workshop they also repair wheelchairs, make crutches and a few other pieces of rehabilitation equipment. For upper limb amputations they had made leather cuffs to place on the forearm and had riveted a spoon or a toothbrush to each of them to help those who lost a hand in a landmine accident to be more independent with basic activities of daily living. The workshop and the ingenuity of the workers was impressive, considering the circumstances, but rehabilitation services fall far short of what we are accustomed to in the U.S.

## Women empowerment

While thousands of women have received training and education, there are still thousands and thousands more crying out for help and support in education, health and security. –Karen Women's Organization

The Karen Women's Organization (KWO)<sup>18</sup> runs a variety of culturally appropriate activities to empower the Karen community and Karen women in the Thailand refugee camps and the Karen State in Burma. The KWO was originally established in 1949 and has more than 30,000 Karen women members. Leaders are volunteers and are elected by the members. They have offices in all of the refugee camps as well as in two major towns in the border area.

One of their major programs is the income generation project. The KWO offers training for women to acquire skills that generate incomes such as sewing, weaving, cooking and business. Products they make are sold in shops in camps and nearby towns<sup>19</sup>. For example one weaving piece can sell for 15 baht (50 cents) and overhead cost for KWO is about 2 baht (6 cents). Materials such as yarn and thread are often donated by NGOs. Although it is usually women who weave, there are sometimes men who do well. According to a KWO staff in the Mae La camp, there was a man named Tamla Htoo who was very talented in weaving. He lives in America now and recently called someone in the camp to say he is unhappy and wants to come back. He does not have a job in the U.S.

The KWO used to run a microcredit loan program but it ended due to the lack of funding. The program lent 2,000 baht (63 USD) to individuals and groups, who were referred by camp leaders, to start businesses such as selling snacks and opening a small shop at their home. Participants were required to report their progress after six months and had to pay back the loan if possible. Financial literacy class was taught in the Karen language so the students could learn accounting.

In 2001 the KWO started the Karen Young Women's Leadership School. This school trains young women aged 18 and over to participate in decision-making processes. Its 10 month curriculum addresses ESL, community management, human rights, democracy, life skills, typing and documentation. They have nearly 100 graduates so far. Recommendations from the community leaders are required to enter the school. Upon graduation the trainings community workers. There are 20 students per year who come from camps as well as the Karen state in Burma. It is a concern that resettlement is taking these graduates away from the community.

Violence against women is also an area that the KWO deals with. It has published two reports on sexual violence committed by the Burmese military against women in the Karen State in Burma.<sup>20</sup> According to the KWO staff in the Mae Sot office, a recent study shows that among 125 women who have been raped, 50 percent were raped by the officers, 48 percent are gangraped by the government troops, 28 percent were killed after the rape, and 90 percent are in forced labor. Some became pregnant and had miscarriages.

For the cases of domestic violence in the camps, the KWO runs four safe houses for battered women where they receive counseling services. The workers showed us a photograph of a woman who came in with a puffy, black-and-blue eye. Locations are kept secret, and the camp security protects them in case of emergency. Safe houses are also used by women with mental health problems, widows, and those otherwise at risk. Social workers, section leaders and camp security will talk with the perpetrators. Staff members explained that the lack of education and alcohol problems in camps are the most common causes of domestic violence. The KWO educates camp residents about women's rights through home visits and theatrical plays at community celebrations.

The Karen Women's Organization (KWO) runs a variety of culturally appropriate activities to empower the Karen community and Karen women in both the refugee camps in Thailand and the Karen State in Burma. KWO offers trainings for women to acquire skills that generate income such as sewing, weaving, cooking and business.

Although it is not compulsory to attend school, education is highly valued in the refugee camps.

There are not enough opportunities for higher education at Mae La. The camp provides vocational trainings and educational options such as teacher training, ESL instruction, mechanical repairs, leadership management, computing, and theology. However, according to a Karen organization, only 25 percent of 400 graduates from 10<sup>th</sup> grade in Mae La camp have access to these options annually.



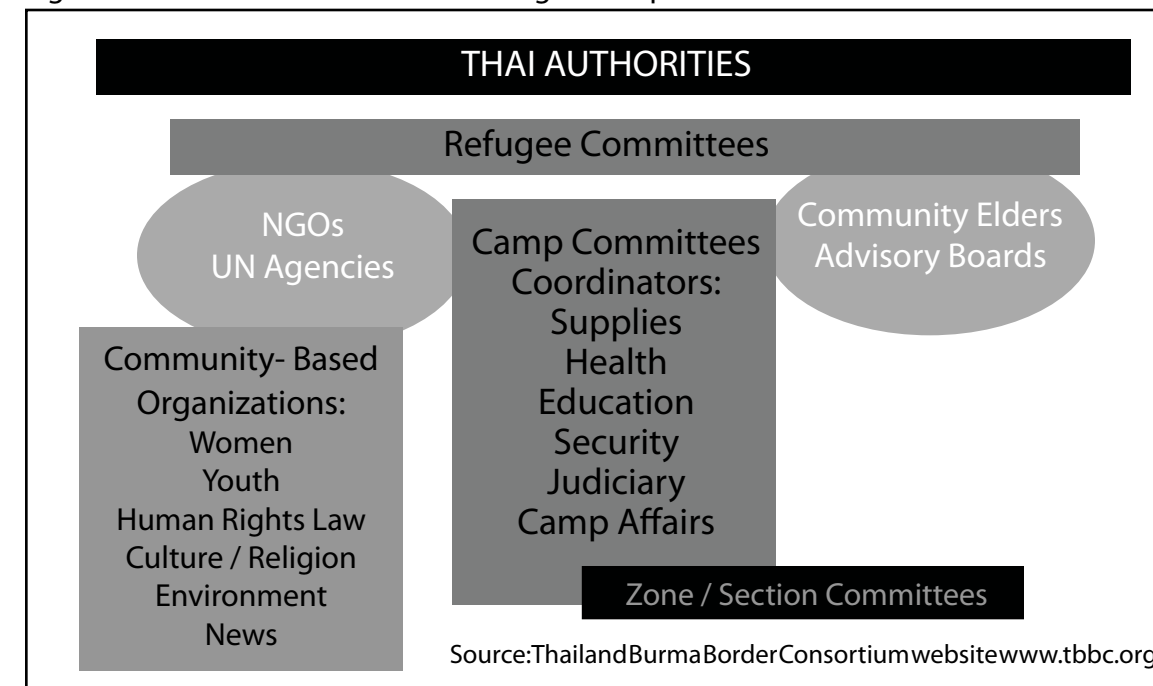
### Youth, education and success

Many energetic, aspiring and restless young will feel sidelined, neglected and unwanted, which can lead to problems. –Karen Refugee Committee

Although it is not compulsory to attend school, education is highly valued in the refugee camps. There are nursery schools, kindergartens and secondary schools which stop at the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. This differs from the U.S. where the placement is according to age and ability. The “No.1 High School” in the Mae La camp has 600 students for 10 grades, with 27 teachers who teach seven subjects: Karen, Burmese, English, Math, Science, Geography and History. Some students also study Thai at the school. Languages are taught at every grade level. The school year starts in June and ends in March. There are tests that the students must pass in September, December and February. School is open Monday to Friday and from 8:50 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. All students go home for lunch from 12:00 p.m. to 1:00 p.m.

On many occasions we heard that there are not enough opportunities for higher education among young people in the refugee camps. For those who finish 10<sup>th</sup> grade, the camp provides vocational training and educational options, such as the Further Study Program, Teacher Preparatory Schools, the Special English Program, Mechanical Training, the Leadership Management Training College, the Mae La Computer Program School and Baptist Biblical Theology School. However, according to a Karen organization, only 25 percent of 400 yearly graduates from 10<sup>th</sup> grade in the Mae La camp have access to these options. There are about 1,000 young people every year who are ‘neglected’ among all the camps, in terms of higher education options. A supervisor of the Drug and Alcohol Recovery and Education (DARE) Network in the Mae La camp expressed concern that drug abuse among young people is increasing.

Figure. 2: Structure of Leadership in Refugee Camps



There are many structured layers and levels in the leadership of refugee camps. While the Camp Commander from the Thai Ministry of Interior has the ultimate authority over the refugee camps, daily activities in camps are run by the residents themselves through Camp Committees administrate the camp. These groups are the ones with power.

The Karen Youth Organization (KYO) represents the needs of young people in the camps and encourages them to participate in activities. The KYO organizes sport competitions as well as cultural and dancing events. It also offers cooking training for young people. We had a traditional Karen dish at a small restaurant in the Mae La camp where those who received training through the KYO cook and earn income. In its environmental program, the KYO provides gardening training to grow vegetable and flowers. They also teach about environmental issues such as the destruction of the forest and about waste management to keep a sustainable camp community. Some young people are engaged in a recycling project.

### Decision making and leadership

Karen people have been fighting for freedom for 60 years. We have self-determination!  
–Karen Women’s Organization

An international organization worker described the leadership of refugee camps as an “onion”, pointing out that there are many layers and levels. Yet, its structure is highly organized. While the camp commander from the Thai Ministry of Interior has the ultimate authority over the refugee camps, daily activities in camps are run by the residents themselves. Camp committees run the camp, and coordinate with key stakeholders such as the Thai authorities, NGOs and UNHCR to make decision for the camp populations. An international organization worker explained that camp committees are the ones with power.

The Mae La Camp Committee consists of 15 elected members who are assigned to different duties, including health, education, security, food supply and women and youth affairs. The Mae La camp is administratively divided into three zones: A, B and C. Each zone is further divided into five sections. Each zone and section has its own leader and committee that work directly with the camp committee. A staff member of an NGO explained that the zone leaders and section leaders have the power to decide who can be on the food distribution list. It was also pointed out that Mae La Camp Committee members are predominantly Christian Karen, and there is no Muslim representation either in the

Camp Committee or Zone Committees despite the fact that they comprise 13 percent of the camp population. Female representation is also said to be weak. According to one NGO employee, people in the camp have grown up within a communist-type structure and lack leadership experience. Moreover, the employee explained that the Karen people have a village chiefs system in which leaders are usually in their position until they die.

I was especially impressed by the quality of the cultural orientation education. Limited by funding and time to no more than 25 hours of training per resident - have maximized their time with creative educational methods and are constantly improving the curriculum and shifting priorities based on the needs of their students.

Yda Smith

Above the Camp Committee there is the Refugee Committee, which plays an advisory role for the Camp Committee. The Karen Refugee Committee (KRC) is responsible for making regulations and laws, including how to elect camp leaders. The Camp Committee described the KRC as the head of the whole camp. The KRC functions like a legislative body. It provides guidelines and works with other organizations on major concerns in the camp. KRC describes its role as spokespersons for the Karen community, as advisors and as a liaison between organizations providing guidance for administrative decisions. Members are chosen by through a selection process by community elders. The KRC has no official mandate or authority.

### Conflict resolution: Formal and traditional justice systems

“One of the difficulties we face is the cultural perception on domestic violence among refugees.”  
–A staff member of Legal Assistance Center in Mae La camp

During the years 2003 to 2006 more than 350 cases of crimes within refugee camps were reported to UNHCR, including domestic violence, rape, murder, the use of children as soldiers and physical assault (Sangkhawan). According to NGO staff members, there are two different conflict resolution systems in refugee camps: one is the Thai justice system, and the other is the traditional justice system exercised by the camp committee. Although all criminal cases in refugee camps are essentially under Thai jurisdiction, there are difficulties in prosecuting cases in the camps.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Thailand applies priority when it comes to serious crimes, including murders and drug-related problems. The Thai authorities also intervene when the Thai community has an interest in the cases, such as involving Thai nationals or the use of natural resources.

The traditional justice system applies for the incidents that may be solved within the camp structure. This process is preferred by camp residents rather than going through Thai legal processes that are unfamiliar to them (Sangkhawan). For example, in the case of domestic violence, people first report to section leaders for mediation. If the issue is not resolved, they report to zone leaders, and then camp leaders. The Thai authorities retain the right to intervene at any level of a dispute.

According to the leaders of the Mae La Camp Committee, there are three major concerns that are raised by the camp residents: First is the issue of work opportunity and the limited freedom to travel; second is sharing natural resources such as forests and water, with local villages, and third is the newly arrived undocumented populations in the camp.

During our stay in the Mae La camp, we visited a Legal Assistance Center (LAC) located in Zone C. LAC is a joint project between the Thai government, UNHCR and IRC to improve the justice system in the camp community. It has an office in every zone in the Mae La camp so that residents can walk in for legal advice. It also provides training to camp committees, camp presidents and refugee organizations; monitors the detention centers run by camp committees; and monitors hearings held before the camp committees.



According to an LAC staff member, Sex and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) has been one of the biggest legal issues in the camp. For the past two years an SGBV protocol has been introduced to deal with the problems. However, domestic violence is perceived as a family issue among the camp residents, and people are reluctant to talk about it with someone who is not a family member. It is also a problem that the Thai authorities do not treat camp residents well. The LAC is currently developing legal guidelines for the Thai authorities regarding this issue.

### Cultural Orientation: Learning the new ways of life

Opportunity + Hard work = Success! –Teaching points of the Cultural Orientation curriculum

Those who are resettling in new countries are required to take cultural orientation (CO) lessons provided by International Organization for Migration (IOM) trainers prior to their departure. CO teaches facts about the new country, as well as skills and attitudes migrants will need to be successful. Each resettling country has its own curriculum with different messages.

CO is generally scheduled to take 25 hours; however, there has been more limited time to train in the last quarter of the most every fiscal year. This is because the international resettlement system tries to achieve an annual quota, and there is a push to process much larger numbers of refugees before the end of a fiscal year.

Lessons are taught by Thai trainers in English and are translated into the Burmese and Karen languages. Lesson groups are separated by language. Groups are also separated by age: adult, children 9-10 years and older, and younger children. Some classes are taught specifically for parents and families. These classes teach sex education for teenagers, and educate parents regarding discipline and hygiene issues. Lessons about abuse and alternative ways to discipline are also taught for families.

Trainers use experiential learning methods, such as role playing, video and discussion methods. Teaching methods in the camp schools are usually based on repetition and remembering. The educational style does not ask students to think for themselves; however, CO teaches problem solving techniques. Students pick out a problem they think they will have in the U.S. and have to come up with the solutions and role play them.

Those resettling in new countries are required to take cultural orientation lessons provided by International Organization for Migration trainers prior to their departure. These lessons teach facts about the new country, as well as skills and attitudes migrants will need to be successful. Each resettling country has its own curriculum with different messages.

The teacher drew a circle on the board and wrote the word "job" in it. Then he drew lines out from the circle like spokes and asked what you get from a job. The answers were money, friends, improvement of English, work experience, development of skills, knowledge, exercise (not sitting around all day), and better health.

Besides the CO lessons, the CO team operates an information campaign to provide information for those considering resettlement. In this campaign they use a theater show with trained actors from the refugee community. For example, they present a situation where the whole family wants to resettle except the father and try to convince him to leave. They also perform an enactment of wife abuse. The husband does not speak English and drinks alcohol. When he learns that the wife is offered a part-time job, he beats her. According to one CO employee, students all say it is the wife's fault because she needs to support and understand him.

It is helpful for all service providers to learn about what refugees know about the U.S. prior to their arrival. The CO team suggests that resettling communities can follow up or build upon CO curriculum after refugees arrive in the U.S. The textbooks of U.S. Cultural Orientation in English, Karen and Burmese are available at the University Neighborhood Partners (UNP) office. A copy of the CO curriculum guidelines with topics, teaching points and duration of classes is also available.

#### Observation of Employment Class for Adults —by Yda Smith

The teacher began the class with a Crazy Chicken dance to get everyone's energy up. He then asked how everyone did their homework. CO is now having students do homework to encourage self-initiative in education. Many of the women had their homework with them. None of the men did. Then the teacher used a ball to develop assertiveness. He explained that whoever caught the ball became one of the winners. He then asked everyone who wanted to participate to stand in the center of the room. He threw the ball to the group and one person would manage to catch it. He did this several times. He provided opportunities for people to quit the game if they wanted to. When the game was finished, the teacher asked the winners why they won. They answered that they moved fast and tried hard. The teacher also asked those who quit the game why they did so. Then the teacher explained that they were winners because they did not even try. He also asked those who stayed in the game whether they would keep trying if they lost several times. Then he asked how this activity is related to moving to America. The point was that the ball represented jobs and the message was to keep trying and be assertive. They were told that they cannot expect others to take care of them for the rest of their lives.

The teacher then drew a circle on the board and wrote the word "job" in it. He drew lines out from the circle like spokes and asked what you get from a job. The answers were money, friends, improvement of English, work experience, development of skills, knowledge, exercise (not sitting around all day), and better health. The next questions were "Whose responsibility is it to find a job?" and "What work experience do you already have (in the Mae La camp)?" Answers to the second question were: school, housework, planting food, selling things, raising pigs/farming, and building/repairing your own house. The teacher continued asking questions such as why Americans have an advantage over Burmese refugees in getting a job. He also asked them to identify barriers to success. Then he handed out pictures of different jobs and started an activity where students learn to identify jobs they already have the skills for and jobs that require education. One objective of this lesson is to encourage refugees to work in entry level positions initially. The teacher pointed out that while you have that first job, the barriers start to go away, and he erased them one at a time to make his point.

Finally, the teacher described three steps to getting a better job. He drew "Improve English" at the bottom, "Education" at the next step, and then "Experience" at the top. He asked what jobs people wanted. He stressed that first jobs will be entry level but not to give up their dreams. He also wanted

them to understand it will take a while. However, the message was to "Go For It!" Then he split them up into groups and gave them a test to see if they understood the lesson.

#### Observation of Life Skill class —by Kim Schmit

This half-day session of the Cultural Orientation was designed for, and attended by the "most passive" (as described by the IOM staff) residents of Mae La, who are preparing for resettlement in the U.S. The class focused on practicing informal greetings, job interview skills, and how to budget one's income. Teaching methods were interactive and experiential, focusing on individual and group role-playing and hands-on activities. While the curriculum clearly focused on life skills, the underlying theme of the lessons was for students to learn to be proactive in their decision-making, as well as to build an understanding of decision making consequences.

The instructors for the class were a young Thai woman, who spoke entirely in English and a young Thai man, who translated everything into Karen. The class was made up of men and women, from teenagers to older adults, and at varying levels of beginning English. The class moved at a very fast pace, and the practical and interactive lessons kept all the students engaged at all times.

Class began with a movement exercise. As energetic music came from the music recorder, the teacher led students in exercises that isolated each part of their body and eventually led to the students vigorously moving their entire bodies at once. The students then moved through the space and when the music stopped, they practiced greeting the person who was closest to them.

The second exercise focused on practicing job-interviewing skills through role-playing. The teacher began by demonstrating one "good" example and one "bad" example of someone going through an interview to work at a restaurant. Then she had four different students role-play a job interview. The rest of the students observed and then provided feedback to why the student was successful and what they needed improvement on. Skills that were taught as "good" were solid eye contact, cleanliness, assertiveness and willingness to work at the job "no matter what" (long hours, low pay, long commute.)

The final observed activity was a lesson in budgeting. Students were divided into small groups, and each group received a "larger than life" calculator, play money equal to \$5.50/hour for 40 hours/week and some shopping advertisements. There were also pictures of "luxury items" on the front board. First, students had to add up their money to make sure it was the right amount (after taxes), and then they were told to decide what they needed for the month. This was done by looking at the ads, as well as thinking about what was going to be needed to pay bills related to their housing. As each group made a choice, they would yell out their decision, and the teacher would then take the appropriate amount of money from them. In the end, the question was whether or not the group had enough money to pay their rent.

The classroom atmosphere was very supportive, and the room was full of energy, laughter and clapping. And while the engaging lessons were vital opportunities to learn practical and important skills, the strong and underlying message remained that positive resettlement would require the students being proactive, moving outside of their comfort zones, and supporting one another through critical individual and group-decision making.

While the curriculum clearly focused on life skills, the underlying theme of the lessons was for students to learn to be proactive in their decision-making process, as well as for them to build an understanding of resulting consequences.



Yda Smith

What struck me the most was the activism demonstrated by the Karen people and their level of participation in camp management. The resilience and proactive nature of the people we met was inspiring. I most enjoyed meeting with the women of the Karen Women's Organization. Their weaving project and domestic violence programs are of a level of sophistication I did not expect to see within camp boundaries. I was also impressed by the extensive network of community-based and nongovernmental organizations providing services in the camps. We met with dedicated representatives from one outstanding organization after another. I was especially impressed by the quality of the cultural orientation education. Limited by funding and time to no more than 25 hours of training per resident, they have maximized their time with creative educational methods and are constantly improving the curriculum and shifting priorities based on the needs of their students.

The outcomes of the field research thus far include connecting families in Utah and the Mae La camp; sharing information with refugee service providers in the Salt Lake valley; beginning a gardening project; and creating an opportunity for Karen women to use their weaving skills as a source of income and community empowerment.



### Impact Of The Field Research

We returned from the research trip with several books and brochures, beautiful Karen weaving products, digital cameras full of pictures, and above all, the anticipation of making use of what we learned for our work. The following describes some of the projects and events that are outcomes of the field research experience.

Connecting families between Utah and the Mae La camp was one of our objectives of the trip. A party was organized at the UNP Hartland Partnership Center shortly after the trip, where people watched a slideshow and video messages from their friends and family living in the Mae La camp and enjoyed traditional food made by Karen and Burmese Muslim families living at Hartland.

Also, what we learned from the trip has been shared with the refugee service providers in Salt Lake City through Power Point presentations. Audiences have included the UNP steering committee members, resettlement agencies, the Utah State Refugee Services Office, school districts, police department employees, and The English Skills Learning Center. Forthcoming presentations will be held for the UNP/Hartland Health Committee and at World Refugee Day.

As a result of this research, new projects have also been developed at the UNP Hartland Partnership Center. For example, the visit to the Catholic Office of Emergency Relief Refugee (COERR) provided information regarding the Mae La camp gardening activities. COERR provides seeds to residents and organizes an extensive gardening project. We were able to see the garden, get a list of seeds and take pictures of produce, much of which was unfamiliar to our group. This information is currently being used to inform a UNP-Hartland gardening project that will be implemented by the University of Utah

Biology Department in collaboration with the Department of Occupational Therapy. At least five Karen and Burmese Muslim families are planning to participate. Mountain View Elementary will have a similar youth gardening project happening at the same time.

Also, information gathered from COERR and Thailand/Burma Border Consortium inspired project ideas. One University of Utah student enrolled in an Anthropology course has been connected with Hartland residents from Burma to do a research project that involves interviewing families about their diets and food preferences, as well as their thoughts about the relationship of food to health. The list of seeds and photographs from the garden and produce stands have facilitated the gardening project's success.

Interactions with the KWO have led to an occupational therapy project to assist Karen women to return to weaving, a culturally significant occupation for them in the past. Four Karen women living at Hartland are weavers but were told by refugee resettlement employees in Thailand not to bring their weaving supplies with them to the U.S. Luggage space is very limited, and weaving supplies were apparently not viewed as a priority by these resettlement workers. Occupational therapy students are now helping these women get set up with backstrap looms, like the ones they used in Burma and Thailand, and are looking into the best way to access weaving supplies. This will allow these women and others in the future, to participate in a meaningful activity that, besides being culturally significant, may lead to income generation.

Finally, UNP Hartland is working towards developing a language program that will support the Karen in teaching their own language to their community, as well as to students and staff who work at the UNP Hartland Partnership Center. This initiative will be within the Language Partnership program at UNP Hartland and will be supported by the English Skills Learning Center and the Department of Linguistics.

Return trips are being considered that would include University of Utah student involvement. An international interdisciplinary course is being considered to include opportunities for occupational therapy, social work and art students as well as those interested from other departments. Work with the Karen Women's Organization, Handicap International, the Children's Art Project and others would be incorporated into the curriculum.

A possible benefit from this trip to the University of Utah is the setting up of return trips that include University of Utah student involvement. Another idea is that an international interdisciplinary course could be designed to include opportunities for occupational therapy, social work, and art students as well as those interested from other departments.





Rosemarie Hunter

I can hear the voice of one of the Karen leaders saying, "Tell them to remember the community here." He went on to describe how in Burma the Karen population did not have the "privilege" of maintaining their own culture, language and tradition. As people fled, they lost their land, villages and homes...they want to hold on to who they are as a people in some small way and they want their children to know their history. On a daily basis I continue to think about how this applies to every community. People come here with hope for a better future, education and to hold on to a sense of who they are.

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the individuals and organizations who took time to meet with our group and sharing valuable information with us during our stay in Mae Sot and the Mae La camp. The names of organizations we visited are listed in Appendix A.

We would also like to thank the College of Social Work; the Division of Occupational Therapy, the College of Health; the Utah Physician Assistant Program, the School of Medicine; and the Hartland Health Partnership team for their financial support of this research.

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## Appendix A: List of visited organizations

- ◆ Aide Medicale International, Mae La camp
- ◆ Back Pack Health Worker Teams (BPHWT), [www.bphwt.org](http://www.bphwt.org)
- ◆ Catholic Office of Emergency Relief Refugee (COERR), Mae La camp
- ◆ Children Arts Project
- ◆ Children Development Center (CDC): schools for migrant children from Burma
- ◆ Cultural Orientation (CO) Team, IOM
- ◆ Drug and Alcohol Recovery and Education (DARE), Mae La camp
- ◆ Handicap International, Mae La camp
- ◆ International Organization for Migration (IOM), Mae Sot Office
- ◆ Karen Refugee Committee (KRC)
- ◆ Karen Women's Organization (KWO), Mae Sot Office and Mae La camp Office  
[www.karenwomen.org](http://www.karenwomen.org)
- ◆ Karen Youth Organization (KYO)
- ◆ Legal Assistance Center (LAC), Mae La camp
- ◆ Mae La Refugee Camp Committee
- ◆ Mae Tao Clinic, [www.maetaoclinic.org](http://www.maetaoclinic.org)
- ◆ Oversea Processing Entity (OPE) / International Rescue Committee (IRC)
- ◆ Pa Wo Hospital / Health Screening Team, IOM
- ◆ Planned Parenthood Association, Mae La camp
- ◆ Shanti Volunteer Association Library, Mae La camp
- ◆ Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), Mae Sot Office and Bangkok Office  
[www.tbtc.org](http://www.tbtc.org)
- ◆ Thammasat University, Bangkok
- ◆ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Mae Sot Office

## Appendix B: List of reports, brochure and handouts available at UNP

## Resettlement

- ◆ Study Guide: A Girl From Glen Innes (Fact Sheets, Photo Kit and DVD), Southern Moon Production  
An educational short movie introducing a life of a Burmese girl who resettled in Auckland, New Zealand. It is linked with social studies curriculum for year 7-12. Good resource for schools to teach about refugee resettlement.
- ◆ 9 LIVES: Refugee Stories: From Burma to America (2008), IOM  
Interviews of individuals who are resettled in the U.S.
- ◆ U.S. Cultural Orientation Student Notebook (2006), IOM (English, Karen and Burmese languages)
- ◆ Guideline for "Jum's Stepping Stones of Education Activity", IOM
- ◆ U.S. Cultural Orientation curriculum guideline, IOM
- ◆ Child Care Book, IOM  
Workbook for children taking Cultural Orientation classes
- ◆ Welcome to the United States: A Guidebook for Refugees (2004), Center for Applied Linguistics (English and Karen languages)
- ◆ Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) handout

## Cultural Profile

- ◆ Karen Cultural Profile: A Tool for Settlement Workers and Sponsors (2006), IOM Bangkok
- ◆ Refugees from Burma: Their Backgrounds and Refugee Experiences (2007), Center for Applied Linguistics
- ◆ Power Point Presentation on the Karen People (2008), Nui & Brock Wilson
- ◆ Profile of the Karen Refugees in this Thailand/Burma Border Region, Karen Refugee Committee
- ◆ The Karen Apostle or Memoir of Ko Thah-Byu: The First Karen Convert (1861), Rev. Francis Mason  
Cultural profile of Karen people written by an American Baptist Church missionary. This was given to us as a gift from the Karen Refugee Committee.

## Women

- ◆ Karen Women's Organization Annual Report (Jan 2005-Mar2006), KWO
- ◆ State of Terror (2006), KWO
- ◆ Shattering Silences (2004), KWO  
Research reports on violence against displaced women in Burma.  
(All of the above are available at KWO's website <http://www.karenwomen.org>)

## Health

- ◆ Chronic Emergency: Health and Human Rights in Eastern Burma (2006), Back Pack Health Worker Team

- ◆ Report on the health and human rights situation of displaced populations in Eastern Burma.
- ◆ Client Detox Assessment Form, DARE Network
- ◆ U.S. Department of State's form of Medical Examination for Immigrant or Refugee Applicant (DS-

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The name of the country entails a dispute. The U.S. government uses 'Burma' as opposed to 'Myanmar' in support of democratic leaders of the country. Those who are engaged in refugee relief in the border area generally use 'Burma'. This report uses 'Burma' accordingly.
- <sup>2</sup> UNP is a University of Utah program designed to link the university with ethnically diverse community of Salt Lake City westside area in ways that create pathways to higher education. Its mission is to bring together university and community resources for reciprocal learning, action and benefit. For further information please see website: <http://www.partners.utah.edu>
- <sup>3</sup> Please see Appendix A: List of visited organizations
- <sup>4</sup> Please note that refugees in Thailand do not have legal status because the country is not yet a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. The populations are generally described as "displaced people". However, this report uses the term "refugee" for easy understanding.
- <sup>5</sup> 1 US Dollar is approximately 30 Thailand Baht.
- <sup>6</sup> For more information on Mae Tao Clinic please see Chapter 6.4 or visit their website <http://www.martaoclinic.org>.
- <sup>7</sup> Please see "Overview on the Rights of Migrants in Thailand" published by International Rescue Committee.
- <sup>8</sup> Please see the Oversea Processing Entity handout for further details of its role in the resettlement process.
- <sup>9</sup> Please see the U.S. Department of State form for Medical Examination for further details of health screening.
- <sup>10</sup> The report "Planning for the Future: The Impact of Resettlement on the Remaining Camp Population" is available at UNP.
- <sup>11</sup> Please see chapter 6.9 for the details of the Cultural Orientation classes.
- <sup>12</sup> A copy of the textbook is available at UNP.
- <sup>13</sup> For further details of KWO please see Chapter 6.5 Women Empowerment.
- <sup>14</sup> A copy of David's Community Agricultural Nutrition handbook (English and Karen language) is available at UNP.
- <sup>15</sup> Please see "Client Detox Assessment Form" for details.
- <sup>16</sup> Sample of the herb is available at UNP.
- <sup>17</sup> The details of the work of Back Pack Health Worker Team can be learned in their publication "Chronic Emergency: Health and Human Rights in Eastern Burma" (2006). A copy is available at UNP.
- <sup>18</sup> KWO website <http://www.karenwomen.org>
- <sup>19</sup> Borderline is one of the shops in Mae Sot. <http://www.borderlinecollective.org>
- <sup>20</sup> Copies of the reports 'Shattering Silences' (2004) and 'State of Terror' (2007) are available at UNP or at KWO website.
- <sup>21</sup> Alternative justice procedures are explored in the report "Research on the Criminal Justice System in Refugee Camps along the Thai-Myanmar Border" by Decha Sangkhawan, Ph.D and the RLPD research team. A copy of the report is available at UNP.



Kim Schmit

When I walked into the training area of the The Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT), I knew I was in the presence of people who are at a level of commitment that I may never truly understand. When I sat in the classrooms of the high school English classes and listened to the delivery of a curriculum that was infused with incredibly strong elements of social justice I was inspired to go home and work with partners to move beyond the confines of No Child Left Behind. When I met yet another teacher, translator, medic or leader who spoke four languages, I felt awe as my own inadequacies and privilege revealed themselves. When I heard an NGO director talk about food shortages in the camps my heart ached for justice, equality, and peace. When I heard Karen leaders talk of their advocacy work, I knew I was in the presence of greatness. When I heard families discuss the pros and cons of resettlement, I suddenly understood a little bit more about time, space and sacrifice. When I met the mothers and fathers of the families we work with at Hartland, I felt humbled and empowered to build bridges.

Now...when I walk the paths of the Hartland Apartments and see Yda's beginnings of a community garden and the weaving project with the Karen and Burmese/Muslim families, or catch a glimpse of Chiho entering the apartment of our Karen leader to do an interview about resettlement that will be read by the families in the Mae La camp, or sit in a meeting and hear Rosey advocate for appropriate compensation and recognition to be given to leaders of groups who have refugee status, or watch a Karen/Burmese community meeting take place, I am filled with gratitude. Gratitude for the opportunity to take this trip and gratitude to the people and families we met in the border area, as well as Hartland, for their willingness to share, teach and reach out.

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