

A semi-annual newsletter for friends and supporters
Summer/ Fall 2008

Community update

We are happy to announce that this April, all six BRP children—Mo-eh, Little Pai, Jab, Kurr, Kamloo, and Artit—who took the secondary school exam passed, and they are now all **enrolled in mattayom, or secondary school**. Thankfully, they have stated that so far, secondary school isn't too hard, especially since they are generally all top students. In fact, they have told the BRP social workers that these days, they are often preoccupied with typical teenagers' concerns, like the fact that their bodies are changing quite quickly, and everyone seems to be suddenly gaining weight or becoming much thinner.

In total, the BRP is currently helping 43 children to attend local public schools this year, with **a cohort of 10 Kindergarten students, our biggest since the BRP's inception**. Those who entered mattayom last year have successfully moved onto the 8th grade. One of these students, Tankee, is the subject of this newsletter's Community Profile.

Khong, whose unplanned pregnancy and childbirth we announced in our last newsletter, is doing much better now. Now that the daughter is a few months old, Khong is accustomed to being a mother. She has received extensive training from the BRP social worker on childcare, vaccinations, and nutrition, and has also received much needed advice on reproductive health, family planning, and independent financial planning. Khong's pregnancy has also prompted a number of honest discussions and informal question-and-answer sessions, led by the BRP social workers, about safe sex.

Finally, we would like to thank the **Martín-Baró Fund for a full year's worth of support**, without which we could not launch the mental health-focused project outlined below.

Consultant needed

Because of stories like Khong's, we are moving forward with plans for a **small mental health and family planning peer education program among young women** at the BRP. We are therefore looking for a consultant or intern to set up the program with the help of the BRP social workers, and to teach basic lessons to 2 peer educators. These 2 peer educators would then work

with others in the BRP community.

We are especially eager to work with someone who is: 1. conversant in Thai or Shan, 2. familiar with basic social/ qualitative work tenets (such as respect for confidentiality, social desirability bias, etc.), 3. is familiar or willing to learn about refugee health, especially regarding reproductive health, family planning, and mental health, and 4. is familiar with or willing to learn about very basic survey research methods.

This person will work in northwest Thailand for 4 weeks, either consecutively or in two periods of 2 weeks each. We can provide an **honorarium of up to \$2,000**, or approximately 64,000 Thai baht, depending on the current currency exchange rate. While we would prefer to work with a local refugee or Thai national, we would be willing to work with folks from the Global North, and to help applicants with grant proposals for extra travel funds if necessary.



Arnon is one of the BRP children entering Kindergarten this year.

Political Update

Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his wife, who was released on bail after being sentenced to 3 years in prison, have fled to Great Britain. Thaksin faces corruption and abuse of power charges in court; and a court has stated that the trial can go on in his absence.

Before going on to the Olympics, US President George Bush met with some Burmese activists in Bangkok, and his wife Laura Bush stopped by the Mae La refugee camp on the

border, as well as Dr. Cynthia's clinic. While the Bush Administration has raised the American public's awareness of human rights violations in Burma, some wonder whether the Administration's economic sanctions-focused approach is sufficient. The Danish government, for instance, has even stated that economic sanctions against Burma appear to be counterproductive. Some human rights activists have also stated that the US's position would be stronger if it withdraws its refusal to work with the Human Rights Council and allow proposed inspections of conditions at Guantanamo Bay, and ends its opposition to engagement with the International Criminal Court.

Within Burma, it remains difficult to glean the extent of the damage from Cyclone Nargis, which hit Burma on May 2-3, and affected or displaced as many as 2.4 million people.

The families of BRP community refugees were fairly lucky, as most lived away from the center of the storm. Some waited for weeks for electricity to be restored, so that they could finally get word that their relatives were safe. But when word came in, they learned that the worst that happened was minor damage to their homes.

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Mission Statement:

The Burmese Refugee Project is a non-profit organization seeking to build participatory models for community development. It focuses on education and the social welfare of Shan refugees living in Thailand. We believe that in building a well-educated, healthy, and economically robust Shan community, we are laying the foundations for a future democratic Burma. Our goals are:

- To educate future participants in a democratic Burma.
- To create a supportive, participatory, and prosperous community.
- To provide social work to persons in need.
- To preserve Shan cultural values among future political and community leaders.
- To reclaim the rights of displaced peoples.

In the rest of Burma, the death toll was lighter than expected, given the government's neglect of its people. BRP Board member Kyi May Kaung writes:

3 months after Cyclone Nargis hit Burma, it has come to light that 40% or more of aid moneys have been siphoned off by the junta through its fixed foreign exchange certificate (FEC) rates. Days after the cyclone struck, the junta pushed through its so-called "referendum" to renege on its promise to UN Secretary-General Ms. Ban Ki-Moon to allow in foreign aid. [The United Nations diplomat] Mr. Ibrahim Gambari's upcoming trip is not expected to achieve much.

The Friends of Burma policy to depoliticize the aid by not attaching it to demands to free political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, has been a disaster. Those who are able have trekked to the Burma-Thai border, but Thai policy towards migrant labor remains unpredictable. Meanwhile, on the Burma side, the refugees now face even more roadblocks in peace-building than they did before.

Finally, an update on the threat of war between Thailand and Cambodia. The Thai and Cambodian governments lowered troops in the border area to the "lowest... possible," and are slated to enter a new round of talks to solve the crisis, which began when UNESCO made the Prah Vihear temple and surrounding area a World Heritage Site (WHS). Anti-government protesters in Thailand claim that some of the WHS belongs to Thailand. (Unfortunately, the recent ASEAN meeting of southeast Asian nations was dominated by this political crisis, when just weeks before, many hoped that this meeting would finally generate unanimous condemnation of the Burmese military junta by the other member nations.)

Community Profile: Tankee

Tankee's parents, Toy and Tona, are from a village 2 kilometers outside of the Shan State city of Lankur. They first thought of the idea of moving to Thailand because others in the village had done so.

"Life was okay," they said at first, but it was difficult to earn enough money to feed themselves, let alone a family of three. Although they worked as farmers, they often had to prepare food for soldiers from the Burmese military junta. Sometimes, Tankee's father was forced to act as a porter for the junta army, and occasionally the work was so hard that one of the laborers died.

To make matters worse, the Shan military often hid in the village's surrounding forest, and they, too, sometimes demanded money from local farmers. Tankee's parents were caught at the crossroads of two armies, when they themselves had no wish to fight.

When they moved to Thailand, they left Tankee's older sister, then 3 years old, with her grandmother in Burma. They first settled in a Karen longneck village in the jungle for one year. Later, they moved to another town, and tried to earn a living there. They can't remember how many times they moved the first few years, except that it was a lot.

Eventually, they settled in a town where other Shan migrant families also gathered, and Tankee was born three years later.

Tankee's older sister, who was left behind, gets by with her grandmother, her new husband, and the remittances Tankee's parents send home through friends.

Tankee herself is now 14 years old, and she lives in a one-room hut with her parents. They hope to visit relatives in Burma this year—if they can receive permission from their bosses, who would also need to escort them to the border and attest to their guest worker status in Thailand. It would be the first family reunion in 3 years.

The family is occasionally harassed by locals, and life in Thailand is economically precarious, but it is clearly preferable to their old life in Shan state simply because they are not in constant physical danger.

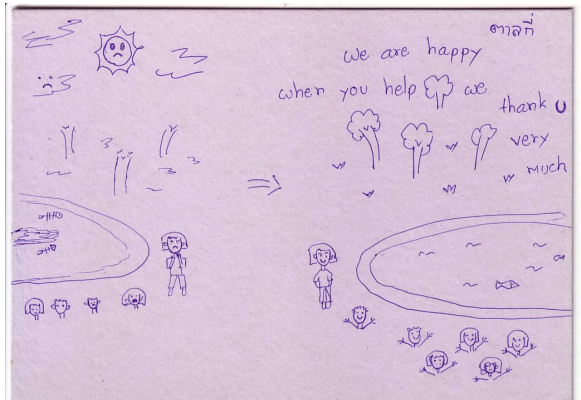
Tankee is in the 8th-grade and loves it. There are no classes she doesn't like. During the hot season school vacation, Tankee works to earn some extra money and helps her parents to pay for extra, after-school programs and tutoring. Even in the BRP refugee community, where levels of enthusiasm for school are high, Tankee's determination and sacrifice stands out.

At first, Tankee struggled to fit in, in school. Even now, children occasionally taunt her by claiming that she should not have the right to go to school, because she is Shan. She tries to comfort herself by talking things through with her parents and friends, but statements like these, especially between classes and during lunch, sometimes sting. Nevertheless, Tankee has made Thai

friends at school: She's in a group of 9 seemingly inseparable girls, of which 2 are Shan Burmese refugees.

Partly because her favorite subject is English, she hopes to become a tour guide when she grows up. She's keen on talking to people of different cultures, learn new languages, and one day, maybe even travel herself.

Her academic achievement serves as a point of pride not just for Tankee but for the entire family; Tankee's parents have spoken to her teachers and beam when recounting their praises, that she is amazing "even compared to the Thai students." They hope to allow her to study "for as long as possible."



Tankee's thank-you card to BRP donors in 2008; hanging out and holding her present at the 2007 New Year's Party.

Help us make a difference:

The Burmese Refugee Project has no administrative and few overhead costs, so a little money goes a long way. With a general operating budget of just \$5,500 last year, we helped 190 Shan refugees gain access to education, health, and legal services.

Tax-deductible donations can be made via credit card at our website, or via checks made out to:

Doctors for Global Health
(Make sure to write "Burmese Refugee Project" in the check's memo section)
PO Box 1761
Decatur, GA 30031

For more information about us, please visit:

www.burmeserefugeeproject.org