

A semi-annual newsletter for friends and supporters
Winter/ Spring 2009

Important BRP Updates

First, we now have 501(c)3 status! We are no longer relying upon Doctors Without Borders, our generous, former fiscal sponsor. We could not have done this without the generous time and money donated by **Kaye Scholer, LLP**, who brought us the gift of help from **Graham Pechenik**. Graham not only made sure that we were on solid legal foundations, he was able to obtain funding for all of the New York State and U.S. incorporation fees.

Second, we **received funding** not only from the Martín-Baró Fund (as reported in Summer 2008) and an anonymous donor, but also from the group Yo La Tengo, who generously donated proceeds from their December 22, 2008 Hannukah concert. These funds will go a long way in funding our very important new education initiatives, which we describe below.

Community Update

The annual New Year party was a smashing success. The kids were in full balloon gear and had a great time. The fried rice and soup wasn't bad, either.

The BRP children continue to do exceptionally well in school. Among the grade school students, we continue to claim a top spot at just about every local school. All of the new high school enrollees have also been excelling, with one student in the highest rank.

However, a few difficulties have crept up. For one, it is not 100% clear that the high school students will be granted a diploma, even though Thai law indicates that they should. This is because local officials are often unaware of national laws, or implement laws in an ad hoc manner. We are thankful for what we have, and do not wish to jeopardize it by questioning these officials. Another issue is that two of the orphans are having difficulties with their host families. Both are living with relatives, but their situations are tenuous. A final issue is that the local schools in which BRP students are enrolled essentially offer a high school diploma as a terminal degree. The coursework is generally



The annual New Year's Party.

not rigorous enough to allow students to compete with students from elite private and public schools in large cities. As a result, we are actively negotiating with private schools for spots and scholarships. While private schools are located relatively far away in Thailand's two main cities, Chiang Mai and Bangkok, such placements would solve all three problems simultaneously. We hope to have an update on these negotiations by the summer newsletter.

In the last newsletter, we mentioned that we had a large influx of new kids entering grade school. This is happening both because a large number of kids became school age and because all of the children are now enrolling in school. These students have transitioned smoothly into grade school. Most of these kids are younger, so we won't have a concrete report on their progress until they complete the first grade.

We also mentioned that we would embark on a new reproductive health initiative. We ended up taking on the initiative ourselves. Our project social workers did an outstanding job talking about the different methods of contraception and how to get them. They also did a lot of listening, and we were impressed with the general level of knowledge and satisfaction the community has with injectable and oral contraceptives.

However, folks in the community were a bit weak on condom knowledge. That is, until Kaan gave an outstanding performance on the proper use of a condom. He almost received a standing ovation from the blushing audience. When the time

came to hand out condoms, one woman in the audience took it upon herself to pass them out. When someone refused, she laughed and stuffed it in his or her pocket without encountering any protest.

Public health issues remain, of course. When Sompong, one of the children who is no longer in

school, developed a high fever, he attributed it to a ghost passing through him. (See the Summer 2004 newsletter for a profile of Sompong.) There is still a bit of work to be done on general health education. We are planning on offering general health education sessions on a regular basis in the community member's native Shan language. Relying on a new Shan social worker, Ekaphan (see Winter 2008), we hope to navigate respect traditional beliefs while introducing basic health concepts from Western medicine.

Ekaphan left the local Buddhist temple, where he served as Abbot. He is now a layperson, and he will be working in Chiang Mai while helping out with the BRP's Shan-specific cultural activities.

Mission Statement:

The Burmese Refugee Project is a 501(c)3 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.

New Signs of Economic Mobility, but Bank Accounts More Difficult to Access

In January, Nuan, Yo, Ying, and Mong-San (discussed in the Spring 2004 newsletter) moved into a beautiful new home. But it isn't just any home. It is *their* home. Using revenue from a hammock-making business and the help of their boss, they were able to buy a house near their old hut. Their financial success exemplifies some of the improvements in prosperity seen throughout the community.



Yo and Ying's old house...



...and their new one.

On the downside, it is becoming more difficult for non-Thai nationals to open a bank account. Proof of legal residency or guest worker status is no longer enough. Bank accounts not only pay a small amount of interest; they also provide a secure place to store funds. Without a bank account, any newfound savings can vanish in an instant. Thus, it would have been very difficult for Yo and Ying to save enough to buy a house in today's banking environment.

And a lack of savings accounts encourages bad habits. Some parents who could be saving small amounts over many years instead celebrate a good day of earnings with alcohol or gambling since it is more secure to spend it rather than to leave it in a poorly protected hut.

When our social workers confronted these families, they pointed out that if they are caught gambling, they could be arrested and deported to Burma. However, the community members informed the social workers that they are often gambling with police officers, so arrest is highly unlikely. We are actively working on culturally appropriate ways of

stemming gambling and drinking, and focusing household funds where they are most needed.

More importantly, the Burmese Refugee Project continues inquiries at banks to see if any continue to allow foreigners to open accounts.

Political Update

The number of dissident arrests in Myanmar has increased in the past half year. Prominent cases include those of the comedian Zarganar, who was sentenced to 59 years for implying neglect by the military junta after Cyclone Nargis killed more than 130,000 people in May 2008, and 80-year-old Buddhist nun Daw Ponnami, who was arrested for participating in the monks' street protests in September 2007.

In other news, the main topic at this week's ASEAN meeting concerned the large numbers of Rohingya people trying to flee Burma. The Rohingya are predominantly Muslim and live within Burma, close to the border with Bangladesh. Even the forced "Burmanization" policy (adopting the religion, cultural practices, and identity of the Burmese) is not open to the Rohingya. The Rohingya are not only stateless; they are refused the right to marry or reproduce. (It is possible to petition the government for these rights, but the petition alone can lead to imprisonment.)

They have received some news attention recently because of several instances where the Thai government has arrested asylum seekers arriving on beaches by boat.

In response, the new Thai Prime Minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, has stated that all regional nations must implement a coordinated policy on Burmese refugees.

Under pressure from Thailand and other nations at this week's ASEAN conference, Burma agreed to take the Rohingya refugees back provided that they declared themselves Bengalis rather than Burmese. (The Rohingya have been living in Burma for at least a thousand years.)

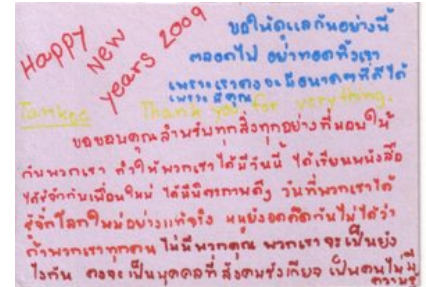
The Burmese consul in Hong Kong released a memo stating that the Rohingya are "as ugly as ogres" and "dark-skinned."

Still, this ASEAN meeting has been historic in one concrete way. For the first time, civil society groups were allowed to attend and meet with governmental representatives. They used this opportunity to roundly criticize the Burmese military junta.

Giving and Receiving Thanks

First, a very belated but heartfelt thank-you to Wichuda McConnell for her invaluable volunteer work for the BRP. Wichuda translated letters between neediest cases children and their sponsors for us, and we never got a chance to thank her for it.

Second, we want to share this moving, impromptu card from Tankee, whose family was highlighted in the Summer 2008 newsletter. Tankee writes:



I wish for us to look after one another like this forever. Don't throw us away [don't forget us] because we feel that we will have a better future because we have you. I beg to thank you for everything that you gave to us, and that you have allowed us to have today, and to study books and meet new very good friends. You truly opened a new world to me. I can't stop myself from thinking that all of us, if we didn't have your help, what sort of state we would be in. Without an education, there is little use for us. Our lives would be wasted.



A few New Year's cards drawn by the children (like Artit's goldfish) have been uploaded to our website.

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 budget of just \$4,500 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:

The Burmese Refugee Project
C/o Peter Muennig
Mailman School of Public Health
600 W. 168th St., 6th Floor
New York, NY

For more information about us, please visit:

www.burmeserefugeeproject.org