A photograph of a village with traditional wooden houses and thatched roofs. In the foreground, a young child stands in a dirt path. To the right, two other children are perched on the edge of a wooden structure. The background shows a hillside with more houses and lush greenery under a cloudy sky.

# Twenty Years on the Border

BURMESE  
BORDER  
CONSORTIUM













# BURMESE BORDER REFUGEE SITES



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# introduction

So much has been achieved  
in managing to sustain  
lives and hopes over such  
a long period of time, and  
yet there is nothing to  
'celebrate' when tens of  
thousands of people have  
had their lives uprooted  
and still face a very  
uncertain future.



BBC ARCHIVE

By Jack Dunford, Executive Director

Twenty years is a long time in anyone's life. It is a very long time to be a refugee. When we realised that in 2004 the Burmese Border Consortium (BBC) had been working with refugees from Burma for twenty years, we felt that it was important to record this in some way. So much has been achieved in managing to sustain lives and hopes over such a long period of time, and yet there is nothing to 'celebrate' when tens of thousands of people have had their lives uprooted and still face a very uncertain future. We decided to produce this book to tell the refugee/BBC story. We wanted it to describe the reality of being a refugee on the Thailand Burma border. Refugee camps are not natural places to live in; refugees in camps do not have the freedoms the rest of us enjoy; freedom to study, work and travel. Refugees have lost everything in their homelands and carry sad and painful memories. Camp life is tedious and the standard of living in these camps is very basic indeed. And yet, for twenty years refugees from Burma have managed to live in dignity and with hope along this border. They have maintained their communities, they have largely managed

*(Above right) A BBC staff vehicle turns over while trying to cross a river on the way to Karenni camps near Mae Hong Son;  
(Left) Refugees quickly set up their own village-style settlements when they arrived at the original Mae La camp in March 1984.*





(Left) From left to right: Michael Hawkes, Christian Aid; Jim De Harpporte, Catholic Relief Services; Sally Thompson; Jack Dunford; Peter Holden, Australian Council of Churches. Ber Kler, March 1992;  
(Below) Telakhon Karen IDPs on the move near the border, 1992.

their own affairs and taken care of each other. Refugees build all the houses and public buildings in the camps, dig all the ditches and water wells, teach in the schools, serve as nurses, health workers and home visitors. Refugees celebrate their faiths in temples, churches and mosques; there are weddings and funerals, festivals, sports and play. With limited space and few resources the refugees do more than survive, they live.

We chose Sandy Barron to write this book and Masaru Gotu to take the photos. We gave them the difficult task of capturing the feeling of this border, of listening to people's stories and of showing a glimpse into their lives. We asked them to portray the hard grind and isolation of life as a refugee but also to celebrate the spirit that somehow survives and shines through. We hope you will agree that they have done this well.

So many people contribute to the lives of the refugees. The BBC story is a remarkable one of cooperation and partnership with many organisations and individuals. The book mentions some of these in passing, but here I would like to acknowledge the key players who have been especially important to BBC. With only one exception, I will mention no individual names, since it would be impossible to list them all.

Sincere appreciation must first be extended to the Royal Thai Government and the people of the Kingdom for allowing the refugees asylum on their soil. When they arrive, refugees usually bring very little with them and it is often local Thai villagers who are the first to take care of them. There have been numerous acts of kindness and generosity from poor people who willingly shared the little they possessed. Although Thailand is not a signatory of the UN Convention and Protocol on refugees she has a proud humanitarian record, providing sanctuary to hundreds of thousand of refugees from neighbouring countries for over three decades. The conflict in Burma has often spilled over into Thailand, threatening



When they arrive, refugees usually bring very little with them and it is often local Thai villagers who are the first to take care of them. There have been numerous acts of kindness and generosity from poor people who willingly shared the little they possessed.

Thai lives and property and presenting difficult political dilemmas. Yet Thai policy has, overall, been extremely tolerant and pragmatic. Throughout these twenty years non governmental organisations (NGOs) have been allowed to provide essential humanitarian services in a generally unhindered and well-coordinated manner.

The priorities of NGOs and the Thai authorities are inevitably different. NGOs aspire to high standards of protection and human rights for the refugees, whilst the Government must usually put national security first. The refugee camps are in remote border areas where there are many armed elements. The refugees are vulnerable and, unfortunately, abuses inevitably occur. But in difficult circumstances the Thai authorities have always been accessible and responsive. As NGOs, we report to the Operations Centre for Displaced Persons (OCDP) of the Ministry of Interior (MOI), which sets policies for our programmes, approves our activities and deals with all our bureaucratic requirements such as visas and camp passes. Its hard working staff have served us well in a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect. It has almost always been possible to resolve problems amicably and satisfactorily.

Over the years we have faced many emergencies including armed attacks on refugee camps and natural disasters such as flooding. Responses have generally been swift and efficient and there has been remarkably little loss of life.

In the field we deal with numerous officials in our day to day work. There are the district and provincial administrative offices, and other civilian organisations such as the forestry department and the local health authorities. There are numerous security agencies including the Royal Thai Army, various task forces, voluntary militia, rangers and border police, many of them working in lonely and dangerous locations with very basic amenities. Over the years we have faced many emergencies including armed attacks on refugee camps and natural disasters such as flooding. Responses have generally been swift and efficient and there has been remarkably little loss of life. Individual Thai officials have often shown great sympathy and compassion in difficult circumstances.

This book is mainly about the refugees and how they work with each other to run the camps. A few individuals are featured, but many heroic stories remain untold. The Karen Refugee Committee, Karenni Refugee Committee and the Mon Relief and Development Committee (formerly the Mon National Relief Committee) provide the main contact between the refugees and the outside world. They have the difficult task of trying to coordinate camp activities and respond to camp problems whilst dealing with the requirements of the Thai authorities, NGOs and a constellation of other visitors and interest groups. Each of them has had dedicated servants who have given themselves selflessly to helping their communities—constantly travelling, dealing with emergencies and difficult situations—whilst they themselves too are refugees who worry about their own families and their futures. In the camps there are camp committees, section leaders, women's and other community organisations who take on huge responsibilities for the refugees, usually with very little compensation, support or appreciation. And then there are teachers, health workers, home visitors, security patrols and, for BBC, storekeepers and distribution teams who quietly and responsibly carry out their duties, month in, month



out, year in and year out, also for very little reward. Many visitors say how impressed they are at the level of refugee responsibility for their own affairs and programmes. And rightly so. The NGOs provide only the basic inputs, the refugees make it all work.

Very important to the refugee story is the Committee for the Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT), of which all NGOs officially assisting Burmese refugees are members. It is through CCSDPT that OCDP sets policy and administers NGO activities. CCSDPT was set up in 1975 to coordinate humanitarian response to the Indochinese refugee crisis. The clear role and responsibilities delegated to it by the RTG has enabled it to be one of the most effective NGO coordinating bodies anywhere. Many NGOs have learned to respect each other and work together through CCSDPT. Its very existence back in 1984 was a major factor in BBC coming into being, and for adopting the philosophy of maximising refugee self-reliance. NGO directors at the time were already used to working together and the trust was there to establish the consortium that became BBC. BBC took on the major task of providing food and (later) shelter and throughout has enjoyed excellent cooperation with the other NGOs who provide health and education services. Today CCSDPT is an important institution, ensuring open and transparent working relationships not only between the refugees, NGOs and Thai Government, but also with donors, the diplomatic community and international organisations.

For many years the international organisations that had played major roles with Indochinese refugees could only observe the Burmese situation from afar. But more recently the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) have become important partners. The UNHCR in particular has done much to improve the understanding of protection issues. In difficult times, there is a refreshing spirit of cooperation as we all try to work with the RTG to address a very uncertain future.

None of us could operate without funding and BBC has had a long and special relationships with its faithful donors. In the beginning the funds came mainly from church groups but as the programme grew, some of them soon started to seek out government funds. At any point in time BBC has usually had around forty different funding sources, which have been located in over twenty countries. Since the beginning, the donors have provided BBC with over US\$120 million and today the majority of funds come from eleven governments. We have come to know many fine people all over the world and enjoyed numerous visits to the border with them. It is these caring people who have identified with the refugees, taken home their stories and ensured ongoing commitment and support. We still also have individuals and churches that make personal contributions, and in many ways these are often the most uplifting and satisfying. It makes us all the more determined to use our resources well for the maximum benefit of the refugees.

Our current budget is about US\$21 million, but a donation of 125 dollars is still meaningful when it is enough to take care of one refugee for a whole year.

*(Below) Refugees with an emergency aid kit provided by the BBC in the 1990s.*

BBC ARCHIVE



*(Below) Rice sacks are stockpiled in camps for up to eight months in the rainy season.*



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There is also a wider network of interest groups, advocacy groups, human rights organisations, and political groups, many of them involving or comprising Burmese living in exile. All have the same vision of a free and democratic Burma in which human rights are respected and natural resources are used sustainably. These groups are also important in ensuring that the refugees are not forgotten and that their problems are known. They are a source of encouragement, a reminder that we are not working alone, that the refugees are important.

Relief suppliers are usually perceived merely as businesses maximising their profits, but BBC's suppliers have also played a very important part in the refugee story. For many years we used only local suppliers who knew the terrain and the local authorities. BBC's business was important to them and they were prepared to work in very difficult circumstances. They have often delivered supplies during emergencies and in appalling road conditions. Some have even taken responsibility for fixing damaged roads themselves. Frequently they have had to sort out bureaucratic muddles with the authorities. BBC has no warehousing or transport of its own, and its suppliers are a vital partner in the relief operation. In twenty years BBC has never experienced a stock-out.

Getting closer to home, I want to thank wholeheartedly, the many individuals who have represented BBC's member organisations over the years as board members. I like to tell the story of my first trip to the border in March 1984, when BBC was effectively conceived, of the individual friends from different organisations who made up that party, and of sensible, down to earth decisions we all made which have been the rock on which BBC has survived the challenges and changes of twenty years. As faces have come and gone, I have often commented in board meetings how similar today's representatives are to those friends on that first trip. BBC has had the consistent support of so many good people who have shared its vision and commitment and given much of their time and energy, even though they have all had their own programmes and organisations to manage. The commitment has never been greater than during this last year as we have planned the expansion and a restructuring of BBC in preparation for registration in the UK, a process which also owed much to the members of the BBC's Advisory Committee. Board members have given my staff and I constant encouragement and support, with very little conflict or controversy. Their role has been crucial to BBC's constant evolution.

And finally I must pay tribute to BBC's staff, a full list of which appears in Chapter 6. BBC has always endeavoured to keep its staff to a minimum in order to maximise the refugees' own involvement and responsibility. For the first five years we had only one staff person and we still had only five in 1995, by which time we were working with over seventy thousand refugees and



a budget of seven million dollars. Our staff have always carried huge responsibilities and have often worked in lonely locations with minimum back-up. They have earned the critical respect of the Thai authorities and the trust of the refugees they work with. They have dealt with emergencies and often played leadership roles when the NGOs have been faced with special challenges. A handful of people have been responsible for spending millions of dollars and accounting for it to our multitude of donors. We have been audited and evaluated many times and although there are always plenty of suggestions how we can do things better (!), there has never been a suspicion of malpractice. Maybe we have been lucky, but we have certainly been blessed, almost without exception, with a dedicated and totally trustworthy team. We are working in a rapidly changing environment these days, our staff numbers have increased dramatically and we have become an innovative, learning organisation which it is a privilege to be part of.

The one person I want to single out for special mention is Sally Thompson, who has worked with me for the last thirteen years. Sally is my right-hand, my sounding board and counsellor. Her judgement on programme issues is solid and she has her own very special relations and understanding with the refugee communities. Her unlimited energy and commitment are a constant source of encouragement not only to me but to all around. I cannot imagine BBC without Sally.

It has been our dream for twenty years that democracy will come to Burma and that the refugees will return home to rebuild their lives and prosper. There have been false dawns, such as during the democracy uprising in Burma in 1988 and during the immediate euphoria following Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD victory in the 1990 elections. But today peace and reconciliation seem as far off as ever. Change will surely come one day, probably when we least expect it, but until that day, our work is not yet done. It is our commitment to go on working with the refugees and the international community in partnership with the Royal Thai Government. Whatever happens, we have to strive for the best possible solution and then, whatever that solution is, we must ensure the best possible future for the refugees who have suffered for far too long already. They deserve nothing less and there is no doubt that, given the opportunity, they are capable of making major contributions to a future flourishing Burma.

Thank you to everyone who plays a role in working with BBC for refugees from Burma. I hope this book will be an appropriate recognition of your contributions but, more importantly, a tribute to the dignity, hopes and spirit of the refugees we work with.



(Above) An office chart showing BBC staff in 1995.

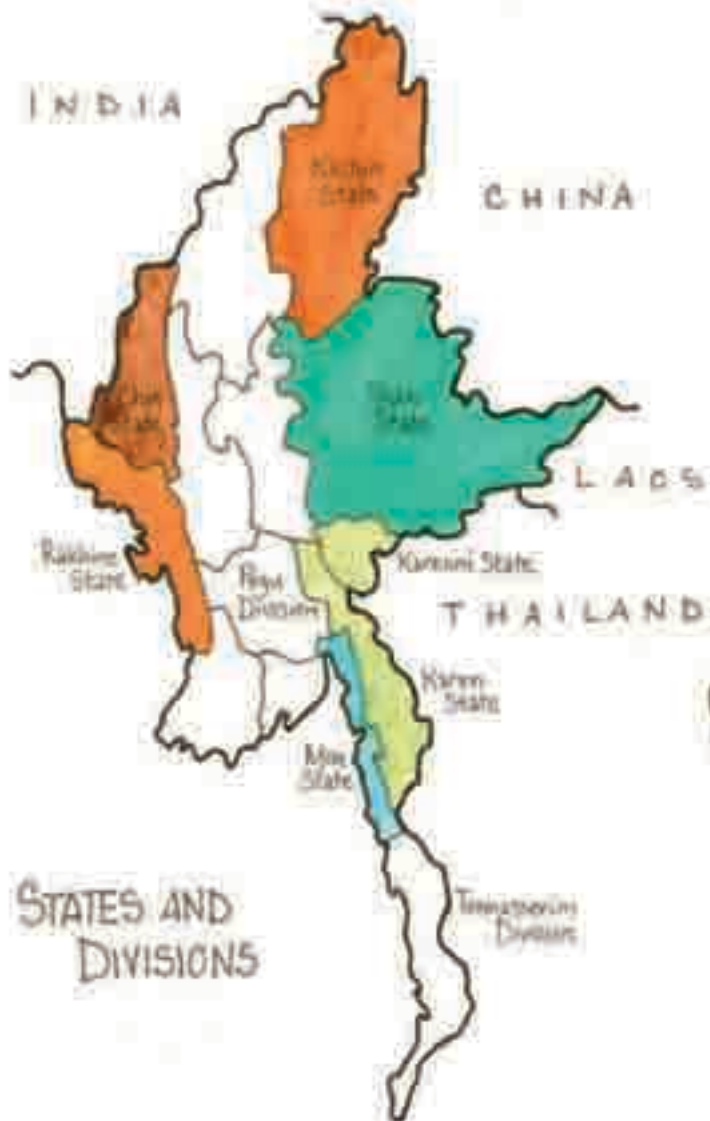
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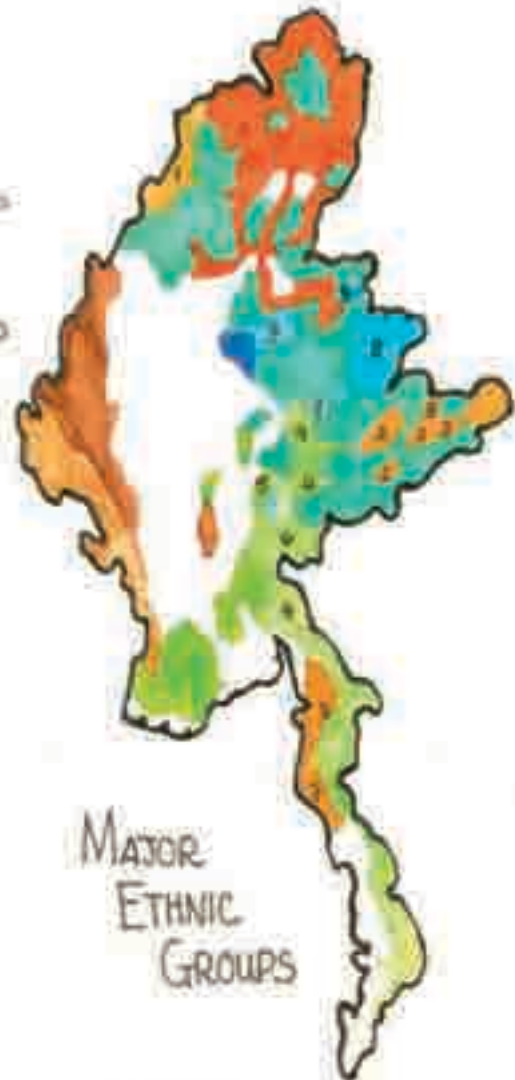
CHINA

BURMA

BBC AUG 2004



STATES AND  
DIVISIONS



MAJOR  
ETHNIC  
GROUPS

TIBETO-BURMAN

- Burman
- Chin
- Kachin
- Rakhine
- Other 1. Naga  
2. Lahu 3. Asha

BURMAN AND  
MON-KHMER

- KAREN
- 4. Pao 5. Kayan  
6. Karenni
- KAREN AND BURMAN

TAI

- Shan
- MON-KHMER
- 7. Mon 8. Wa  
9. Paluang
- BURMAN AND SHAN





## chapter 1

## twenty years—a history

The refugees thought  
that the soldiers  
would leave before  
the next monsoons.  
And then they would  
just go home....

*(Left) Refugees arrive in  
Thailand with only what they  
can carry on their backs.*

For centuries, life followed ancient rhythms in the rugged mountain territory between Burma and Thailand. Protected by jungle, isolated ethnic farming communities lived in aloof and closeted worlds. Time in the remotest hamlets followed different laws. History was told in oral poetry and Buddhist chronicles, dates were virtually unknown; if you asked a man when he was born he might tell you 'when the lily flowers bloomed.'

For many farmers and ordinary people, not a great deal was different by the last quarter of the twentieth century. Well worn trade routes for goods like timber and cattle linked the border cultures tenuously with the world beyond. The British colonial period, Christian missionary activity, migration flows and local political conflicts had brought flux and change to sections of the border. The Second World War followed by Burma's independence struggle had intense but short-lived impacts. For the most part, though, the rural core of the old border cultures and lifestyles remained untouched, shielded still from the surrounding politics and intrigues by the old reliables—tough terrain and terrible weather.

Since those would never change, it wasn't surprising if some greeted the dramatic events of 1984—when Burmese troops entered deep pockets of ethnic areas, sending almost ten thousand mainly ethnic Karen people into Thailand—with less than panic. The refugees thought that the soldiers would leave before the next monsoons. And then they would just go home....

## Origins

The offensive that was spewing mainly civilian farmers and small traders into exile two decades ago had old roots. Centuries-old distrust between Burman and other ethnic groups had flared into outright rebellion after 1948, when Burma achieved independence from Britain and ethnic groups failed to gain the autonomy or independence they sought.



# A Brief History of the Burmese Border Situation

1. 1984  
THE FIRST REFUGEES



2. 1984 to 1994  
BORDER UNDER ATTACK



3. 1988 to 1990  
DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT



4. JAN 1995  
THE FALL OF MANERPLAW



5. 1995 to 1997  
THE BUFFER FALLS



6. SINCE 1996  
FORCED VILLAGE RELOCATIONS



*(Right) Karen Refugee Committee members and camp leaders in March 1984.*



Caught in the middle of the conflicts, ethnic civilians in the outlying regions began to pay a grim price. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Shan villagers stranded in Thailand were reporting that Burmese troops had been pressing them into service as 'human mine detectors.'

The Karen, who been friends to the British and felt betrayed and vulnerable when they left, soon started what has become the world's longest insurgency. Other groups such as the Shan and the Karenni—and the Mon who harked back to a glorious era when their Buddhist civilisation and culture was the glittering jewel of the region—also went into rebellion when their aspirations were unfulfilled. Rangoon regarded the rebels as insurgents threatening national unity and determined to crush them.

Caught in the middle of the conflicts, ethnic civilians in the outlying regions began to pay a grim price. By the late 1970s and early 1980s, Shan villagers stranded in Thailand were reporting that Burmese troops had been pressing them into service as 'human mine detectors.' A Lahu village headman told foreigners that his village had been burnt down and children killed. Pockets of Karen had also been forced to flee.

## Early days on the border

But the scale of the January 1984 attacks was something new. Camped in hastily-built shelters in Thailand, Karen refugee leaders were soon telling anyone who would listen that they urgently needed rice; just enough to tide them over. Letters began to fly from the border to Bangkok and around the world. "I hope things would be set right. We put everything in the hands of the All Mighty God," wrote refugee representative Pastor Robert Htwe in a letter.

By February, the Thai Ministry of the Interior (MOI) invited voluntary agencies working with Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese refugees in the east of the country to provide limited emergency assistance to the people now entering from Burma in the west. The Thais expected—and wanted—the problem to be temporary. Thailand was already hosting some 350,000 refugees, and was concerned over potential effects on its relationship with Rangoon.







*(Above left) Refugees help to move a rice truck stuck on a muddy road; (Above) The refugees themselves took charge of rice distribution from the beginning; (Left) Don Pakiang, an early refugee camp.*

The aid groups had to play catch-up quickly. After years of self-imposed isolation under the military dictatorship of General Ne Win, Burma was a relatively unknown quantity for many people. The grouping of agencies that made up the Committee for Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) hastily sent a mission to the border.

There, they found the new arrivals "...extremely well organised. There seemed to be no issue over land. The Thai authorities were letting them build camps that felt more like villages. Rudimentary schools were already in place. Rice and medical aid were starting to come in as Karen Christian leaders were writing letters for help to any and all their contacts," recalls Jack Dunford, a member of the first mission whose trip led to the forming of the group of NGOs that became the Burmese Border Consortium.

The group formed a plan to work in partnership with the well-run Karen communities, and to take a coordinated approach to aid provision.

"We had found something on the border that was quite different to other refugee situations we had seen, in which whole societies had been torn apart. Although the Karen had already been struggling for a long time, their communities had remained intact, and their own social and governing structures were still in place. It made sense to support and recognise the Karen Refugee Committee (at first called the Karen Christian Refugee Committee)," Dunford remembers.

As 1984 continued, the Karen refugees continued to do what they could to take care of themselves, even attempting to meet their own rice needs by planting just over the border—efforts that were soon put paid to by rats, rains, and land and political pressures.

Further south along the 2,401-kilometre border, Mon villagers had also been forced to flee.

"We want to report that there is a camp of victim and poverty. It is large enough. But on account of several reasons, it is unknown to the world and should be sorrowful. It is situating at Three Pagodas Pass," wrote refugee representative Nai Wieng Chan in an August 1984 plea for help.

Three Pagodas Pass, etched in the Thai psyche as the marker for the mountain gap that had allowed a conquering Burmese army headed by elephants dressed for war to enter and crush the glorious old kingdom of Ayuthaya more than two centuries before, was being over-run once more.

This time the invaders came in tatters, the shirts on their backs already falling apart. In a typewritten letter to Bangkok, the monk Venerable Wangsa requested "sarong and loin-cloth for an estimated nine hundred people at ten villages near the Three Pagodas Pass. They are the most suffering people."





## Flight from fear

In the last twenty years, over one million people from ethnic areas in the east of Burma have fled their homes, either to enter Thailand or to live precariously as internally displaced people in isolated pockets of their homelands.

For villagers in ethnic areas, the arrival of Burmese troops often means they will suffer extrajudicial killings, rape, the burning of homes, forced labour, theft of property and livestock, and arbitrary taxation.

The images shown here, taken from inside the ethnic areas, show the abandoned body of a villager who was forced to work as a porter for Burmese soldiers; the wounded back of another man made to work as a porter; the body of a woman who was raped by soldiers, and villagers standing around the remains of their homes which Burmese troops burnt down.





*(Above) Lydia Thamla, one of the early Karen refugee leaders.*

The Karen refugees were by now slowly adjusting to the shock that the Burmese army had not left with the monsoons. They would not be going back across the border just yet.

In 1985, further Burmese offensives began to cut off more old Karen and Mon trading routes and support bases. Thousands more civilians fled into Thailand.

“We still hoped that it wouldn’t last long,” recalls Lydia Thamla, a Karen refugee leader originally from Rangoon. “Who would have imagined we’d still be waiting to go home, twenty years on...?”

## Groundwork

Lydia remembers the frantic early days spent writing letters to church and aid groups, and rushing with medical teams and a BBC field worker from one new arrivals crisis to another on remote pockets of the long, snaking border.

Many of the refugees had never known anything but their own ancient animist culture on isolated jungle farms, where customs as well as concepts of time, space, and history, were a world removed from the new situations and people they were now encountering. “If you asked them their birth date they might tell you ‘when the wild flowers bloomed,’ or ‘when we dug the big field.’ Some people were so frightened that they didn’t dare say their name, or even their parents’ name. There was a lot of sickness, a lot of malaria. We had to help them to build latrines, which some had never seen, before setting up a camp.”

The new arrivals came bearing the same grim stories—villages burnt down, villagers forced to work as porters, women raped, summary executions—that continue to haunt the border.

In the midst of the crises, people forged the foundations for the enduring partnerships that continue today between ethnic community leaders and aid agencies on the border. The newfound relationships, involving steep learning curves on all sides, weren’t without their frustrations, or their comic sides. Lydia found it necessary, sometimes, to protect already traumatised refugees—and Thai villagers—from the shock of the ways of some newly-arrived foreigners. “Sometimes the foreign women would hang their sarongs above men’s clothes, and hang their underwear on a balcony. The men would sit on people’s pillows. Oh, I had to apologise all the time, to everybody! It was quite funny. The foreigners didn’t mean anything by it and I didn’t want them to feel bad either. So I would get up early in the morning and take the sarongs and underwear down before anyone woke up.”

Meanwhile the aid organisations on the border were also still feeling their way in new and unfolding situations. Mainly French groups were assisting with medical relief to the refugees. One early incident almost jeopardised the developing system of relationships



around the early refugee camps, says Jack Dunford of the BBC. In 1987, "A report came that a Karen National Liberation Army unit had gone around from house to house in the middle of the night in Sho Klo camp, rounding up men and boys and frog-marching them off to the join the army. They also stole two bags of rice. We wrote a stern letter to the Karen National Union (KNU), demanding that the refugees and the rice be returned. This was absolutely not what the camps were for. Within two days there was a reply from the commander of the 7<sup>th</sup> Brigade. It was an apology, saying that all the men and boys had been returned home. And the rice was given back. There was a similar letter from the KNU headquarters. I felt 'This is interesting. This is different to other situations. To a large extent these people are responsive, honest.' This meant the programme could work."

The aid programme continued to emphasise the independence of the refugee committees. While they took the responsibility for storage and distribution of rice and essential supplies, and for administering the camps, the BBC was able to focus on the formidable logistical tasks around trying to ensure that no new arrival along the border went hungry or unprotected, and that all the camps were adequately supplied.

As the numbers of displaced ethnic people continued to swell in the following two years, the BBC faced constant challenges and its donors received ever-escalating requests to dig deeper to provide funds. New projections were made speculating that the number of refugees could reach fifty thousand. A sense of predictability was entering into events.

## Uprising

That changed in 1988, when news of a pro-democracy uprising in Rangoon and throughout Burma electrified groups on the border. They were stunned again when the harsh military crackdown that followed sent around ten thousand Burmese students and others running to the jungle, where they set up new camps or joined existing ethnic refugee settlements.

Suddenly, radicalised young Burmans and ethnic peoples were living together, exchanging stories about a common enemy. The wider political landscape changed. "For the first time in Burma, there was a connection between the democracy issue and the ethnic issue. Before this, Ne Win had been successful in persuading people that Burma was fighting a war with insurgents who were trying to tear the country apart," said Dunford.

"The international community had pretty much accepted that version and the ethnic groups had got very little sympathy," he added.

## Pastor Robert Htwe, Chairman, Karen Refugee Committee (KRC)

As the longtime head of the Karen Refugee Committee, it is not surprising perhaps that Pastor Robert Htwe, 63, has the pragmatic air of someone used to making ever-reappearing crises go away.

For twenty years the committee's days have been spent negotiating a tricky route between the endlessly shifting needs and priorities of the camp communities, Thai authorities and outside aid agencies. "It's twenty-four hours on call here, all emergency work. It has always been so. But the way I feel about this job is—well, it's my duty. I quit in 1999 but two years later I got called back."

Pastor Robert's detailed monthly reports on the refugee situation to the aid agencies that became the BBC, starting way back in 1984, helped ensure that supplies to the camps worked as efficiently as possible.

In the early days, he says, "people thought they would soon go back. The Thais wanted them to go quickly. We had to explain that we could not. The Karen were strong then. We were always very busy. There were a lot of headaches as we negotiated with the authorities, and tried to discuss things with Thai villagers, so we could understand each other."

As the years rolled on, Pastor Robert kept focused on the practicalities. Except once. "I saw many things, yet I never cried. Never. And then a message came from Kanchanaburi in 1977; 'Grandfather, come to look.' It was a place called Bo Wee. It was very hot. New people were just arriving, about two hundred of them, and their children were crying. They were hungry, and they had to wait, and wait. I knew those people were very poor and were having a very difficult time. The Thai authorities put the men in a truck to send them to another camp. After five minutes, the rains came. I had nothing to give, no first aid, nothing. People were trying to cover their children with their longyis. After ten minutes, they began to sing. It was a hymn. They were a choir, and they were singing in alto, bass, tenor and soprano. When I heard that, I cried. I stood there and cried. Then I told the people that I couldn't see this anymore. I gave them a thousand baht for plastic sheeting and left. That was the time I cried."



BBC ARCHIVE

(Top) Pastor Robert Htwe, head of the Karen Refugee Committee; (Above) Newly arrived refugees make makeshift shelters at Bo Wee camp in 1997.



There was also, at first, 'total confusion' and some more steep learning curves on the border. The students—many of them educated urbanites—struggled to adjust to the harsh new jungle environment in which lurked malaria, diarrhea, and other terrors. Some feared they had arrived to live among headhunters; they were surprised to find kindness and hospitality. Others could not adjust to the local diet and complained that they were being starved.

The Burmese military government had become an international pariah after crushing the democracy uprising and, also in 1988, launching a huge new offensive against the Karen. Soon, though, Rangoon was signing new logging and fishing deals with leading Thai military figures. Valuable forests formerly under Karen control began to be logged by Thai companies, paying taxes mainly to Rangoon. The ethnic groups were losing control over trade and business over increasing sections of the border, and more refugees were arriving in Thailand—occasionally, it was said, on logging trucks.

By now the BBC, which was supporting virtually all the border's needs for rice, fish paste, salt, blankets, and mosquito nets, was already pondering its role as an emergency relief programme in a situation that had all the signs of continuing indefinitely. After deliberation, it was felt that any radical change in the administrative system in the camps could jeopardise the communities' sense of self-reliance as well as interfere with potential resolutions of the conflicts—but that camp conditions needed to be upgraded.

"The voluntary agencies are... concerned that the refugees have been living at a subsistence level and with minimal community services for nearly four years now... whilst this may be acceptable for a short period, it is not acceptable over a long period, and the upgrading of services provided must be given serious consideration by the Thai government..." said a consortium report.

## Losing territory

Meanwhile Burmese troops were continuing to wrest control over more areas along the border. In 1989, fierce fighting in Karenni state sent the first large influx of refugees from there into Mae Hong Son province in the north of Thailand. Too Reh, 46, and his wife Baw Meh, 36, were just married when Burmese soldiers entered their village. "We had to run, and then it was so difficult going from place to place in the jungle that we came to Thailand."

Hundreds of kilometres to the south, more Mon communities were also running. Mi Doh, 58, had to flee Three Pagodas Pass. "I had money. I was prospering. I was trading in furniture and I had twenty tons of wood in storage. Then I had to run away from it all, leave everything and go, with six children and two small pots," she recalls with wide animated gestures, in Halochanee camp near Sangklaburi.





*(Above) A family makes a crude shelter out of containers after their home was burnt down in an attack on Wang Kha (Huay Kaloke) camp;  
(Left) A grandmother and a child survey the remains of a burnt out camp.*



The border groups suffered their biggest psychological blow in 1995 when the Karen headquarters, Manerplaw, fell to Burmese troops after Rangoon was able to exploit grievances among a group of Buddhist Karen unhappy with the mainly Christian leadership. The breakaway group became the Democratic Buddhist Karen Army (DKBA). Soon after, more KNU and Karenni bases were lost, and thousands of Shan refugees were fleeing from forced relocation programmes.

In Thailand, the number of refugees continued to climb, but soon camp dwellers were not even safe on Thai soil as their places of refuge turned into hotbeds of fear. Burmese army and DKBA shellings of the camps in Thailand sparked a catalogue of new crises for refugees in camps and the BBC between 1995 and 1998.

In one April 1995 attack on the remote camp of Mae Ra Ma Luang the DKBA burned down 170 houses and the BBC rice store. One child was killed and ten adults wounded, two of whom later died of their injuries. "We used to be so scared all the time," says K'Nyaw Paw, 23, then a teenager in the camp. "We had a system in the night of hitting bamboo to raise the alert. You would lie awake all the time, afraid of every little sound in the dark. When we were attacked you had to run out into the dark with some food and wait in the forest until dawn."

Further south, the night sky exploded in a blaze of light on the night of January 28, 1997, when DKBA attackers stole into Wang Kha (Huay Kaloke) camp ten kilometres north of the busy town of Mae Sot, setting fire to about sixty percent of the camp and forcing refugees to run for their lives into the surrounding scrublands. Even sheltered Mae La camp wasn't safe. Two elderly women were killed, four girls were seriously wounded, and one man died of heart failure while running for cover in a 1997 attack.

In a different kind of crisis, Mon refugees near Sangklaburi were thrown into uncertainty after Thailand set an April 1996 deadline for their return to Burma following a ceasefire agreement between the New Mon State Party (MNSP) and the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in June the previous year.

Though the Mon refugees moved back to Halochanee and other so-called 'safe areas' by mid 1996 under the terms of the 1995 ceasefire agreement, they still remained far from their original homes and without the means to support themselves. The BBC undertook to provide limited assistance such as foodstuffs, mosquito nets, mats and blankets, as well as agricultural items such as seeds, beans and equipment designed to help the relocated camps achieve self-sufficiency. (Today the BBC continues to provide some rice assistance to the camps, which are still taking in flows of internally displaced people fleeing land confiscations, forced labour and other human rights abuses in sections of Mon state).

By 1997, for the first time in history, the Burmese army had tenuous access to and control over the entire border region. The ethnic

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nationalities no longer controlled any significant tract of territory. Their old cultures and communities reeled as whole villages took flight, abandoning homes, schools, farms and religious buildings to be burnt down or to rot in the jungle.

## Camp pressures

The end of the old ethnic-area 'buffer zone' between the Thai and Burmese, and the clear jeopardy into which the cross-border attacks had thrown the safety of the refugees, sparked a significant shift in the way the camps worked. To improve security, Thailand had embarked on a series of camp consolidations. Small village-type settlements were merged into a much reduced number of large, sprawling camps that were now increasingly dependent on outside aid from the BBC and other non-governmental organisations and where residents were subject to far more restrictions on their movements. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was assigned a limited protection role for the first time in 1998.

Thailand, which is not a signatory to the UN Convention on Refugees, was also increasingly insisting that it would accept only those 'fleeing from fighting.' Yet after 1996 the ethnic populations inside Burma were being placed in ever rising danger as the Burmese army continued with massive relocation plans aimed at consolidating its bases, bringing the population under military control and eliminating the ethnic resistance. By mid-2004 almost three thousand ethnic villages had been destroyed, affecting at least a million people. Hundreds of thousands of people remained displaced inside Burma, their sufferings barely known to the world outside, while the population of the border refugee camps had increased to more than 140,000.

Today, an extraordinary twenty years after the first large-scale influx of ethnic people from Burma, the border camps continue, flimsy-looking as ever on the outside, running with practiced, if difficult, efficiency within. Like the refugee community it serves, the BBC has had to grow and change over the events of the last two decades. The handful of staff that ran the operation in the early years has had to increase dramatically, and the aid budget has spiraled to around US\$21 million annually. The organisation's core philosophy and operational style, which insists on flexibility and partnership with the refugee communities, remains unchanged.

The troubles of the refugees from Burma are more widely known today than twenty years ago. But that has little effect on those who are spending huge portions of their lifetimes in the temporary shelters of Thailand. For many young people, the camps are the only home they have ever known. Old people are dying before achieving their deep wish to return to their homeland. The ethnic communities continue to wait for the political solution that would allow them to finally go home in safety and peace.



*(Above) Mae La camp, the largest refugee settlement, after it was consolidated in the late 1990s.*





## chapter 2

# people

### Forced out

Mi So-al, 53  
FROM MUDON TOWNSHIP,  
MON STATE (LEFT)

Twenty years after the first large influx of refugees to the Thai-Burmese border, new people continue to arrive, seeking sanctuary.

Says Mi So-al, 53, "I came to Halochanee camp six months ago (early 2004) with my five children. The village headman at home forced me to leave because I couldn't provide any tax or labour to the Burmese army. I was too poor. My husband went to Thailand three years ago and disappeared, I never heard from him since.

"I tried and tried to stay in the village, but that corrupt headman forced me out. No one can go against him. He is close to the authorities and if you cross him, he can put you in a cell, like a prison, and lock you in stocks for twenty-four hours.

"I'm waiting to find some job here. We don't have enough rice. Some young people helped my boys with books and stationary for school, at least."



### Camp attack

K'NYAW PAW, 23 (ABOVE)

K'Nyaw Paw, seen above with her father Saw Nimrod and brother Ler Pwey Taw at Mae Ra Ma Luang camp, was a child when her parents, former small-business people on the Salween river, fled to a refugee camp in Thailand. The worst part of growing up in camps was the fear of attack, she says. In one of the scariest of such events, in 1995, she was preparing for school lessons in the evening when the sound of shelling burst through the bamboo slats of her home. Soldiers from the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) were firing on the refugee settlement.

"The signal to flee was a banging on the bamboo. When you heard that, you didn't feel, you didn't think. You grabbed some food, some plates and you ran. We ran into the forest. You just go, and keep going, keep moving in the dark. You couldn't use a torch. We put cloths in the mouths of babies so they wouldn't cry. We slept in the forest for two weeks... after the first week we got rice and plastic sheets from the BBC. Luckily it was the cold season, not the rainy season."





## Parenting

SAW PAW KAY, 33  
MAE LA CAMP (LEFT)

Many ethnic areas inside Burma are strewn with landmines, resulting in a very high incidence of injuries for civilians as well as combatants.

"More than ten years ago, in 1992, I stepped on a mine near the Mae La river and lost my leg. I was a soldier at the time. Afterwards, I got married. My wife and I have three children now, and we are expecting a fourth soon. I don't have a job anymore. I just live here in Mae La camp. There is nothing I can do about it. I understand the situation. We are a people in trouble, but we survive."

## Green plan

DAVID SAWAH  
SITE 1 (RIGHT)

David Sawah, a former mining engineer in Karenni state in Burma and a refugee camp leader in Thailand, is now turning his attention to improving the refugees' nutrition and health, by introducing new gardening techniques.

"These days I am a sort of telephone operator, connecting traditional Karenni ways of farming with new ideas. There is little room in the camps, so we're developing 'limited space gardening' to help people grow their own food and improve nutritional standards. All our gardening works on a self-sufficiency basis, using available materials."

*(Overleaf) Young Karen performing a traditional bamboo dance at Mae La Oon camp.*



















## Heading for a hundred

PU LAR MU, FROM MUDRAW DISTRICT  
MAE LA OON CAMP (ABOVE)

The elderly population in the refugee camps are a store-house of memories.

"I am 99 years old, soon—heh—I'll be a hundred. A very long time ago, I fought with the British against the Japanese. The British were good—they paid a salary. I first became a refugee in 1975. In the last twenty years life has been difficult. It is difficult to bring up a family in a camp. It's not easy being wholly dependent on others. But at least, in the camps you have food."

## Minding the spirits

Oo Reh, 57, ANIMIST LEADER, FROM KARENNI STATE (LEFT)

Animism is the traditional religion of many ethnic groups on the border, and is still the main belief system for most Karen, Karenni and others. Oo Reh, a Karenni animist leader at Site 1 near Mae Hong Son, tells an anecdote to illustrate how belief in the spirits affects all aspects of every day life.

"We believe in the spirits of our grandparents. Everything has a spirit. See this leg? I was out in the forest with a friend when I fell from a rock and hurt it badly. I knew that this had happened because my spirit and my luck were lower than my friend's. His spirit was stronger. So, I wanted him to come and put his thread around my leg, to fix it, but after two weeks he still hadn't come. The hospital couldn't fix it. Medicine and tablets did nothing, the leg was as bad as ever. Eventually, my friend came and put his thread on my leg. It was immediately better."







## Bring on the crowd

EL DY, 53 (*LEFT*)

"The more that watch, the better," smirks El Dy, 53, in Mae La camp. "Small audiences are no fun," she says, after performing an impromptu series of mimes and sketches sending up coy young Karen lovers and spoilsport, ambitious mothers.

Later, she recounts the harrowing tale of her own life's troubles and twists—after fleeing Karen state she lost an infant baby just before her missing, presumed dead, husband "came back like a ghost." Still, she maintains, "I never seemed to be unhappy...I always tried to look on the bright side. I kept singing and dancing."





## Mae Tao Clinic

*(Left)* Karen medic Ler Kwah and an assistant attend to a patient at the Mae Tao clinic outside Mae Sot, popularly known as Dr Cynthia's clinic after its founder, Dr Cynthia Maung.

Dr Cynthia fled Burma in 1988 and founded the clinic in a makeshift shelter on the border soon after. It has since expanded to become a multi-faceted health care facility for migrant workers and ethnic populations, and a training centre for refugee health workers.

## The Only Way is Up

*(Right)* Strength and balance get you to the top in the traditional sport of pole climbing on a rainy Sunday at Mae La Oon camp.





## Real Men

*(Right)* Four men from Mae La camp display the intricate tattoos that are seen in Karen culture as a mark of character and virility.









## chapter 3

# life in the camps

In their enclosed outposts on the edge of Thailand, life is both eerily strange and grittily, tenaciously, real. Caught between the past and the future, the refugees focus on the present. They go, one man explains, their “own way.”

On remote mountain perches or nestled under jungle peaks, the refugee communities live out exile in lonely, thrumming, bamboo cities, many within distant view of the places they have left behind. Stranded between worlds, they have created one of their own. In their enclosed outposts on the edge of Thailand, life is both eerily strange and grittily, tenaciously, real. Caught between the past and the future, the refugees focus on the present. They go, one man explains, their “own way.”

### The system

Mae La Oon camp, population fourteen thousand refugees. Rules: “Any camp committee member arriving late to a meeting will be fined thirty baht. Anyone not wearing Karen dress will be fined fifty baht. Those who are absent without permission, fifty baht.” Shine Marie, deputy camp leader, points to a final notice tacked on the rattan wall of the camp office sitting high on a hill above a muddy sports field.

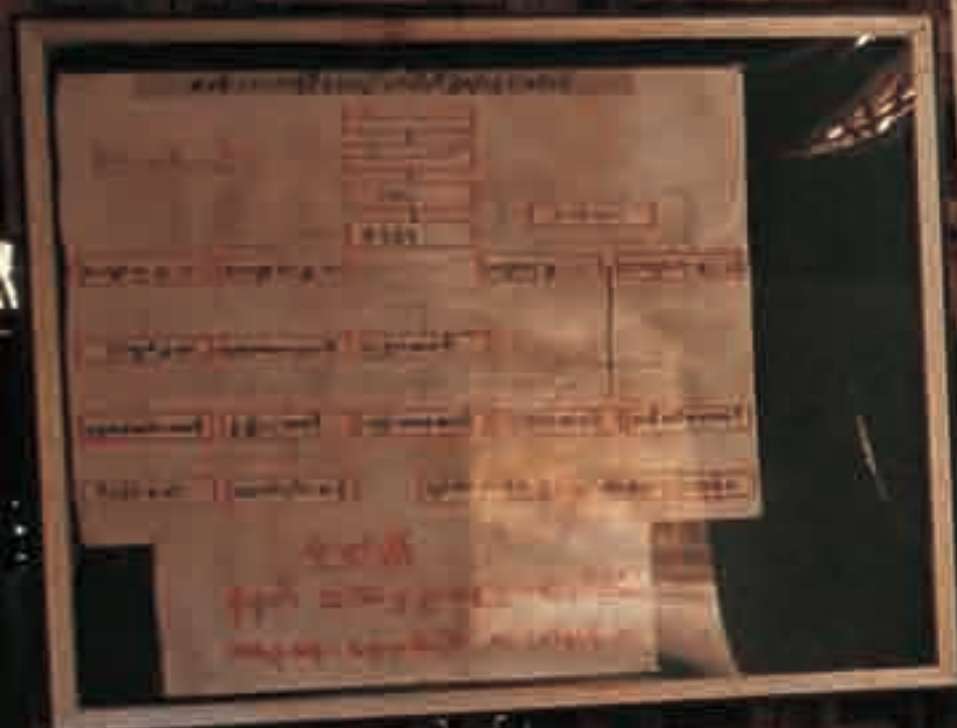
“It’s the *worst*,” she says with an expression of horror, and please god she’ll never have to do it. “Anyone who is repeatedly late must perform thirty sit-down and stand-ups.”

Beneath the cloak of humour donned by many on the border, leaders of the 140,000-strong refugee population steer a challenging and delicate course. Negotiating between the needs of the camp communities, the Thai authorities and outside agencies who supply essential goods is a recipe for “crisis management—permanently,” laughs a senior member of the Karen Refugee Committee whose day starts not long after 4 am—the Karen way—and ends just after seven in the evening.

When the first large influx of refugees arrived in Thailand twenty years ago, visitors were surprised to discover that entire scattered communities had reorganised and were running their own affairs within days of their arrival. Karen refugee committees were sending

*(Left) A Karen man holds a drum on his way to a wedding celebration in Mae La Oon camp; (Overleaf) Early morning discussions at the camp office at Ban Kwai (Site 1) near Mae Hong Son.*





गणना विवरण		
१. कुल जनसंख्या	१०००	१०००
२. पुरुष	५००	५००
३. महिला	५००	५००
४. बालबालिका	२००	२००
५. वृद्ध	१००	१००
६. श्रमिक	३००	३००
७. किसान	२००	२००
८. व्यापारी	१००	१००
९. शिक्षक	५०	५०
१०. स्वास्थ्यकर्मी	२०	२०

विवरण	
१. कुल जनसंख्या	१०००
२. पुरुष	५००
३. महिला	५००
४. बालबालिका	२००
५. वृद्ध	१००
६. श्रमिक	३००
७. किसान	२००
८. व्यापारी	१००
९. शिक्षक	५०
१०. स्वास्थ्यकर्मी	२०







letters off to potential supporters and assuming responsibility for distributing the first aid supplies, establishing a system of refugee self-administration that has continued through to today, on a much larger scale.

The system's survival through the years, including during periods of repeated crises—sporadic large refugee inflows, attacks on the camps, floods, camp moves, and one period when the Karen committee's own relatives across the border were running for their lives—has helped the refugee communities to maintain a sense of internal integrity and autonomy.

Each refugee camp is headed by a single leader—usually a man although there has been one woman in the position—assisted by a committee and section heads who take responsibility for the kinds of tasks that in other places would fall to local government.

Hundreds of refugees serve on the camp committees, organise the storage and distribution of supplies such as rice, fish paste, cooking fuel, blankets and many other items, and work on safeguarding the camps' physical environment and infrastructure. Community health clinics are overseen and the school system supported. The committees run camp security systems and oversee the administration of justice. They work to ensure smooth relations with local Thai authorities and communities, and coordinate activities with outside NGOs who provide aid, such as the BBC and medical, education, sanitation and other agencies.

The committees sometimes also provide small social welfare assistance for people with special needs and for occasions such as funerals. Women's affairs are represented. The work load, which is all carried out on very small budgets, necessarily involves juggling a great number of competing pressures. No one has ever claimed that the system was perfect, but given all the difficulties, it is a quite remarkable testament to the communities that that it has survived and worked well for two decades.

There seems to be no great competition for the top leadership jobs, especially as the camps grow larger and the communities poorer. It is relatively common for people to stay in top posts for many years. Long-time camp leaders who try to bow out of their jobs are often asked to stay on, or are recalled. The head of the Karen Refugee Committee since 1984, Pastor Robert Htwe, was unsuccessful in a bid to step back a few years ago. Daphne Tun Baw, 83, a teacher, 'retired' almost twenty years ago and has hardly taken a day off class-work since.

Meanwhile, a flowering of small community organisations in recent years is providing new outlets for young people. At Mae La camp, youth groups are taking the lead in issues like the environment and recycling. Some are producing radio programmes and community newsletters. In Ban Kwai (Site 1) near Mae Hong Son, young people are working together in efforts to improve educational opportunities for older children. "It is essential that they don't lose hope," says youth leader Annabel Mubi Gomez, 26.







*(Above) Young men bathe and women wash vegetables and clothes in a pool at the edge of the Yuam River in the early morning at Mae Ra Ma Luang camp.*



## Rice, roads and logistics

“Rice, rice, please just send rice” was the message going out from ethnic communities in 1984. At first, the refugees tried to grow their own just across the border—by December 1985 Mae Tha Waw camp dwellers had harvested five hundred baskets of rice and Sho Klo, six thousand baskets—but there were new crises. “Rats and untimely rain have done great damage to the rice crops... the harvest will not help much to meet the need of the refugees,” reported Pastor Robert Htwe in a KRC monthly report to the group of aid agencies that later became the BBC.

But as the numbers pouring into Thailand continued to swell and land and political pressures mounted, the responsibility for rice and other food fell virtually entirely to the BBC. Its main task would be coordinating the logistics of transporting supplies of rice, fish-paste and salt, as well as sleeping mats, cooking fuel and blankets, to the numerous camps scattered along the border.

The heavy-laden trucks that became a regular sight lumbering through Thai villages faced an annual roadblock—the wild border weather.

Trucks are grounded during the rainy season, when the rough high trails leading to many camps turn into rivers of red mud perched precariously over sheer valley drops. In some camps, up to eight months’ rice supplies must be stockpiled to tide the refugees over during the isolating rains.

Sometimes the rice trucks are pressed into service to transport people during camp relocations. Though accidents have been remarkably few over the years, the journeys could be fraught and dangerous. In 1995, DKBA soldiers who had crept into Thai territory in the Mae Sariang area attacked a truck carrying refugees en route to safer ground, killing a driver hired by the BBC and two refugees.

K’Nyaw Paw in the back of the truck was a teenager at the time. “They fired at us and we ran into the jungle and hid the whole night. We didn’t dare go back until daylight. Then we found the driver had been shot and killed. An infant was still there, hanging on to its mother, who was dead.”

Many Karen, champion walkers who are unused to vehicles, become car-sick riding packed together on the rough roads. Such trips have become an unavoidable part of their long stay on the border’s edges.

One BBC field worker remembers learning an “unforgettable lesson” about the people she was working with. “I was driving about twenty amputees, landmine victims, to a camp, on a terrible road in the rainy season when the truck got bogged down in mud. It was almost dark. Everyone took off their prostheses and got out. I will never forget the sight of that truck, stacked with discarded legs, as everyone got underneath and heaved it out.”

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*(Above) A camp worker marks a ration card on rice distribution day;  
(Left) Working to fix a muddy road at Halochanee camp.*



The same 'can do' attitude is seen in the camps, where the refugees take entire responsibility for rice storage and distribution, normally held once or twice a month in different sections.

On distribution day hundreds of sacks are emptied out to form large white piles. People gather around with their ration books, waiting and watching as the stores staff measure each family's ration and the piles are eventually whittled down to nothing.

There are separate distributions for salt and fish-paste, mung beans, cooking oil and fuel, and for the high-nutrient wheat/soy blended food that has begun to be introduced throughout the camps during 2004. It has been generally welcomed for its health benefits, and, said one refugee who enjoys the taste, "for the novelty value."

## 'Home'

The day starts early—actually, in the night—in the mountain camps. Long before dawn, the first footsteps can be heard creaking on bamboo, the first ghostly shapes appear on balconies in the half-light. Fires are lit, the scent of smoke snakes through trees and alleyways. There is little talk. Early morning is for the feeling of solitude.

There's not as much of that otherwise these days in the consolidated camps that are home to anywhere between ten and forty thousand people. The large settlements are, however, divided into 'villages' that are a comforting rough mirror of the communities that existed across the border.

"Old villages are kept together as much as possible. When new people come, we try to accommodate them close to relatives or friends," says a member of the Karenni Refugee Committee. (KnRC)

The ingredients for a house are bamboo or eucalyptus poles for the structure, leaf or thatch mats for the roof, and a week or so of family sweat for the construction. Plastic bags of water and sand are hung for fire protection. Popular decorations include calendars showing nature scenes and Thai beauty queens. Many homes have shrines or religious items like colourful cloth hangings with messages in English such as 'In God we Trust.'

For sleeping, there are plastic woven mats, simple blankets, and mosquito nets supplied by the BBC to help prevent malaria and respiratory infection. A few utensils are pressed into constant service for cooking and washing. "Oh, clothes," groans a young woman who grew up in the camps. "It's so difficult when you're a teenager. You'd usually just have three items for the top and three for bottom. You couldn't keep them clean, especially in the rainy season."

It is more pleasant to live 'down town,' close to the small community stores, clinics, sports grounds and meeting places.



(Above) Working on construction in Mae Ra Ma Luang camp.

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## A Place Apart

If a man's home is his castle, Pu Lincoln's is a monument to a state of mind. "They call me a displaced person living in a temporary shelter. Therefore I will live in a displaced temporary kind of house."

Amid the ancient overflowing tin cans and the tin stove, the piles of scavenged bits of bamboo, old socks, thin shirts, buckets and pots and posters, a scattering of *Economist* magazines and *Nation* newspapers lie open on headlines concerning the Iraq war, 'Ali's Story,' and 'Lonely Oldies.' Beside the near-buried sleeping mat are the study papers for Lincoln's diploma in community management; graduation is expected within two months.

Lincoln, 83, glinting with sharp charm, does things in his own time; no wonder, since his life has been a crazy series of accommodations between hopes and war and flight. The second son of a school inspector studied at Bible

school and an Indian agricultural college before returning home to farm in a war zone and then throw up everything, at fifty three, to become the Karen army's unlikely newest recruit. For a time, he took care of goats at a KNU coffee plantation, "until the goats wrecked the coffee plants" and they and he took off; Lincoln to return to education work in a mission school. At 76, he was running from Burmese troops and into the challenging year of living under plastic sheets in Thailand that sparked the state of mind, he hints, that created this house.

Today, two young students creep in for an English lesson, clearing a space to sit on tin can stools on the earth. Lincoln growls, "Teachers here earn ten baht a day. My ducks used to give me thirty baht." Suddenly, it is possible to divine an air of little catastrophe, an absence in all the jumble. The seven ducks, good layers and named companions who used to share the house and its patch of garden, were taken away a few months ago in a bird flu cull. "I told those men they were worse than the Burmese soldiers. It was like a military operation." Along with the chickens and ducks—no one knows why—went the camps' pigs, and its pet dogs, and cats.

If Lincoln ever gets to leave Tham Hin, he has a place in mind. "New Zealand would be good, it's an agricultural country. I could raise sheep for their wool."









BBC ARCHIVE

With no cars, motorbikes, or bicycles around, rooms with a view come at the price of a calf-busting exercise regime for young people, potential isolation for the infirm or the old.

Spotting a woman sitting on a balcony in one of the high-perched houses, a young veteran of Mae Ra Ma Luang camp sticks a lip out in a grin. "We say of those that if you drop your cup, you can pick it up a hundred yards below."

For everyone, there is the challenge of space. You are rarely out of earshot of your neighbour. And there are a lot of neighbours. "In a typical village at home, there is loads of room around a house... most families will have a large garden and an orchard around them. The communities are small. Here, it is like fifty villages are crammed into one," says one young camp dweller.

Yet she is describing leafy Mae Ra Ma Luang, the garden-heavy camp Karen black humourists call 'Club Med' or 'the heaven of the border.' A few hundred kilometres south in the treeless camp the jokers call 'hell,' houses are a metre apart.

Even so, someone recently found room to manoeuvre. An elevated overhead three-storey 'bridge room' has been spotted recently connecting two rickety houses over one of Tham Hin's tiny alleys. The joke: 'See, for the Karen, the only way is up.'

## Garden

One of the scarcest things in the camps is space, except in one direction. So when fifty-something David Sawah was taken with an unexpected passion for growing things, he looked to the sky. Soon pumpkins tumbled over rooftops and yam vines towered over men in a camp near Mae Hong Son.

Creative planting, David Sawah reckoned, would improve community nutrition, reduce people's need to seek work outside the camps, and point to useful new ideas for a people made up overwhelmingly of agriculturists.

The one-time engineer and former camp leader was a "total green novice," and needed information. Friends and contacts outside supplied books and articles. Together with the Karenni Refugee Committee and with backing from NGOs, the first experiments grew into an ambitious project called CAN, which stands for Community Agriculture and Nutrition.

Early on, camp farmers weighed in with information on pest control. "They know a lot about that. Planting tobacco near rice keeps insects off the paddy, for example." They also told David Sawah about hard-working herbs. One leafy, calcium-rich good performer, called the Drumstick or 'Mother's Best Friend,' helps pregnant women, they told him. And, laid down on a bed of other

(Above) 'Limited space' gardening means using all available options—including the roofs of these houses at Umpiem Mai camp—for growing plants.



plants for a week in a process called 'damping off,' it can deter fungal attacks on other plants.

In David Sawah's adopted system—also known as vertical gardening or limited space gardening—nothing that can possibly be coaxed into a new incarnation is allowed to die. Old BBC rice bags become airy plant pots, dead tyres make a nurturing circle around soil holding young shoots or around kitchen waste that is on its way to becoming compost. "Waste is not waste," he laughs.

Self-sufficiency is the key idea informing the project, and the secret is in the ground. "If you have healthy soil, you can have good plants, and healthy people." Now, training in composting, vertical gardening, and other initiatives that focus on using available materials have sparked branches of the project in other camps along the border.

Thai villagers as well as representatives from other local ethnic groups like the Shan and Pa-O have also come to learn from CAN.

Techniques to 'heal the soil' could also help some of the thousands of Karenni who are displaced inside the Burma border and suffering serious food deficiencies, David Sawah feels. He is demonstrating contour planting—a method of alternating rice rows with layers of other plants that restore vital nutrients to the soil—which would remove the need for people to clear new fields every year. "I have heard that some people have already tried it out," he says. Another innovation is the 'living fence' made of a variety of plants and trees that provide food for people and animals, and 'fire food'—wood. The project is also sharing techniques for building special stoves and concrete latrines.

The BBC will distribute a handbook David Sawah has written demonstrating CAN's techniques throughout the camps and to other border communities in late 2004. The first print run of ten thousand copies will be in Burmese, Sgaw Karen and English. Future editions will be produced in Shan and Pa-O languages.

## Health

The harsh physical environment, poverty, and the refugee life make holding on to peak health an achievement on the border. Malaria is still the number one enemy. "We say you're not a real Karen if you have never had malaria," jokes one multi-time veteran of the disease.

Those suffering from malaria and other relatively common diseases such as acute respiratory infections, diarrhea and skin infections are treated in basic clinics run by camp medics who are supported by international medical NGOs.





*(Above) BBC field assistant Arthorn Srikeratikarn talks to a woman who is comforting a sick family member at a clinic at Mae Ra Ma Luang camp.*



Camp health workers also carry out home visits to provide information on preventative care and to monitor residents' problems. There are clinics for maternal and child care and targeted nutritional programmes for vulnerable groups such as infants, and new arrivals. The latter are often in extremely poor health after living rough in the jungle, or simply because there is virtually no functional health care system, and rising incidence of drug use, HIV/Aids, tuberculosis, and other diseases, inside Burma.

For more serious health issues, including landmine injuries, refugees may receive treatment in local Thai hospitals, or if they are in the Mae Sot area, visit the busy Mae Tao clinic founded by Karen refugee Dr Cynthia Maung, winner of the Ramon Magsaysay award and numerous other prizes for her services to the displaced population.

## Schools

Simple, packed full and modestly-resourced many camp schools may be, but at least they are normally staffed all day, "which is more than can be said for inside Burma," sniffs a former senior teacher there. He adds; "In one sense the Rangoon authorities are understanding. Teachers earn around 5000 kyat, (\$8) a month, which no one can live on. So the authorities allow them to work in school for just half a day, so they can do other jobs later, like selling newspapers, taking private classes, labouring. Even heads of departments would disappear after lunch-time..."

Schools are highly valued in the camps, as children are seen as the key to community and cultural survival. But how to motivate young persons who see no options ahead, other than to become a camp-based teacher, medic or occasional day labourer?

Lydia Thamla, a senior community leader, is despondent. "I'm worried about the next generation. They have good brains, but they don't have a chance. They say they have no future, so why should they study? Morale is down." Adds Say Say Pilate, education coordinator at Mae Ra Ma Luang, "Only the very brightest, or those whose parents really encourage them, go as far as 10<sup>th</sup> standard."

Still, she is pleased that education services in the camps have seen steady improvements over the years. Traditional low rates of literacy among the refugee population are rising. Toddlers at Mae Ra Ma Luang can now attend nursery school. The quality of the education children receive is good, she says, as is the fact that schools receive vital outside support from NGOs.



*(Top) Young Mon students swap notes at a school at Halochanee camp; (Above) Colourful beakers add a cheery note to a schoolroom at Site 1 near Mae Hong Son; (Right) Children take an afternoon nap in the school.*







## Time Off

Inside an unpainted wooden school, a bunch of beakers in bold primary colours hanging on a wall act as a magnet for young eyes. Novelty items and toys are almost as scarce in the camps as they are in the border areas left behind, so children rely on imagination—and company, of which there is never a shortage—for amusement. After school, girls and boys fan out to play chase. In some camps, they gather around swings and climbing structures provided by Right to Play, an NGO.

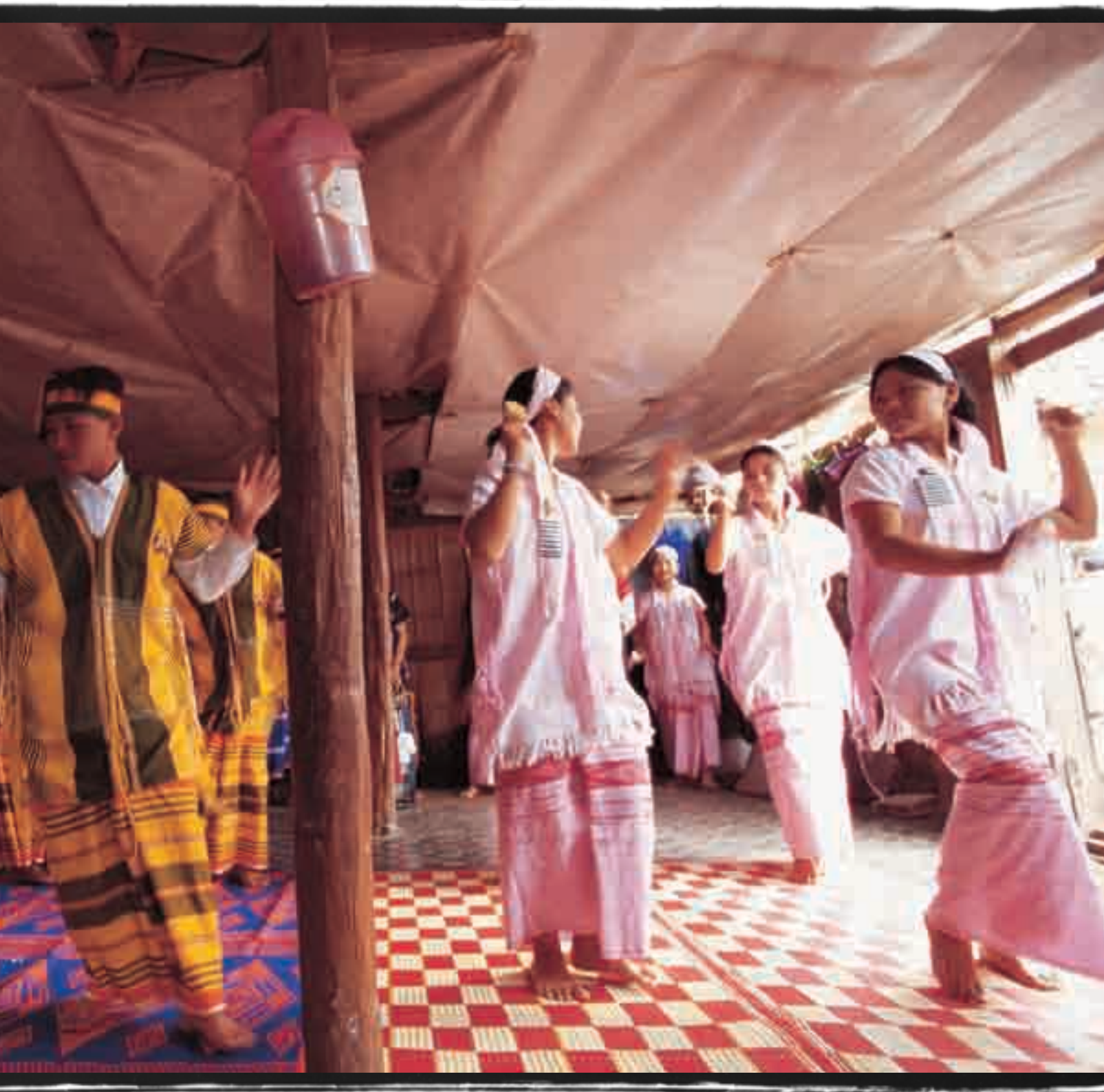
Older students play volleyball, football, and takraw or chinlone, the skilled sport in which players must keep a rattan 'ball' in the air with their feet and elbows. In the late afternoons, boys occasionally produce guitars. Homework must usually be fitted in before dark because candles are scarce.

In many communities weekend video screenings, powered by small generators, provide diversion as well as virtual escape into the world of Hollywood or Burmese and Asian action movies. Shortwave radios keep camp dwellers informed of news and political events.

For special occasions and celebrations, young Karen people in traditional dress take the lead in elegant Dohn dances to music in the pentatonic or five-toned scale provided by players of harps, fiddles, pipes and gongs. Old stories, legends and 'hta' poems and songs from an ancient oral tradition may be recounted and revitalised, sometimes with the help of a little rice wine.



*(Left) Guitar-playing is popular among young men in the camps.*



*(Above) Young Karen at Mae La camp perform a traditional Dohn dance.*



# passages...

The refugee camps are an extraordinary twenty years old, but the idea that life can, should, and does go on—in all forms of vigour and complexity, and despite all the difficulties and hardships that present themselves—is a point of passionate, proud, and sometimes defiant determination.



(Above) June Paw was born in the middle of June 2004 at a clinic in Mae Ra Ma Luang camp.



*(Below)* Games help young people to cope with the restrictions and limitations of life as a refugee.







Maw Thi and Naw Ja Heh set out on married life on their wedding day at Mae La Oon camp.







*(Below)* Many refugees who arrived as young people have now spent the prime years of their lives in camps far from home. They are looking into the years of old age with no change in sight.



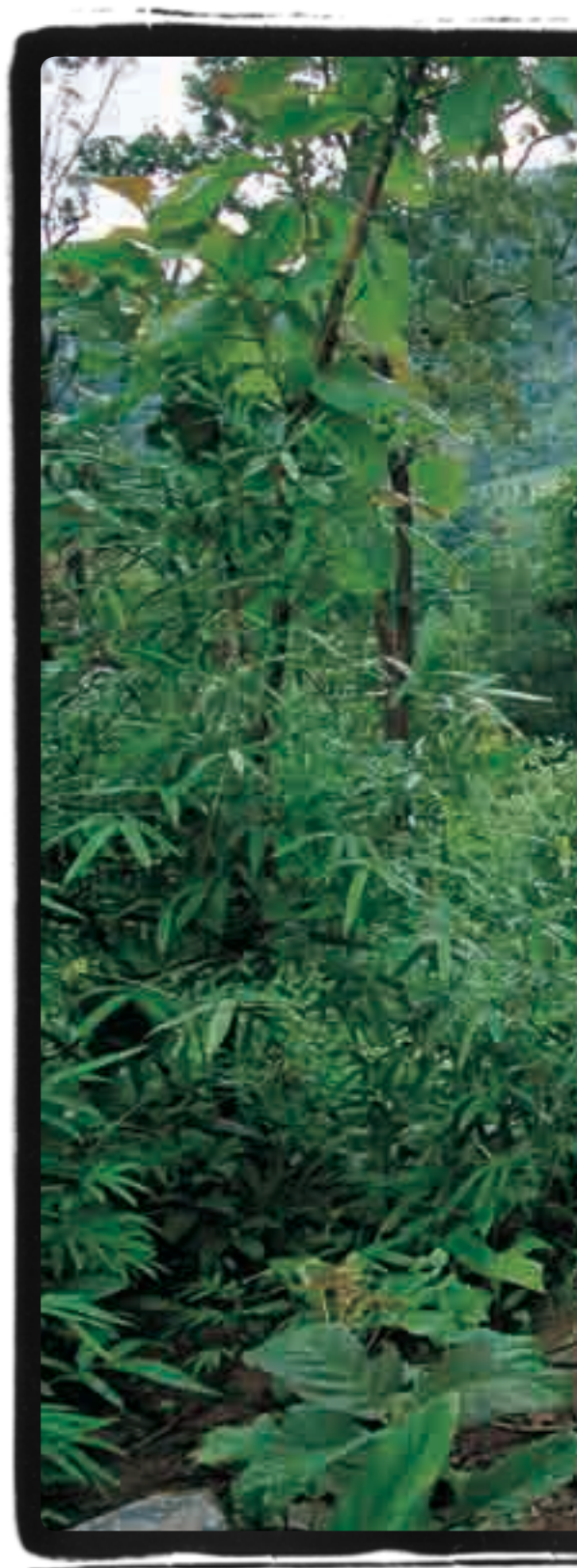
*(Right)* Those who have already moved into old age fear that they will die without seeing home again. Mui Lah, 70, rests for a moment after visiting a clinic at Halochanee camp.







*(Above)* Family members gather around the body of an elderly refugee who died earlier in the day in Mae Ra Ma Luang camp.



*(Right)* A grave stone at Mae La camp. Says one elderly Muslim wit; "It doesn't feel good to think you would be buried here. This is not our native place. We would like to go home to be buried. But you cannot go back to die. Before you could die, you would be killed."







Four generations: The family of Le Le Win, headed by great-grand parents U Hla Shwe and Daw Nay Pwein.









## A Journey

An old Karen tradition of 'hta' poetry continues today. As well as writing a book on the history of the Karen, Thra Baw Poe, leader of Mae Ra Ma Luang camp, penned a poem about setting out, ill, on the back of a motorcycle to Chiang Mai city, known to the Karen in the old days as Dog Barking City. (This version has minor editing.)

### My visit to Wayh Kee Mae (Chiang Mai City)

By Thra Baw Poe

(Translated by Naw K'Nyaw Paw)

I have been to Kee Mae once  
Four hour trip, made my back tight...  
Kee Mae appeared smiling  
In the past I have been there  
Only in my dreams  
My life is more than forty years long  
For the first time, I saw Kee Mae

Doi Suthep, famous mountain  
Lies down still like a hen  
Like a cobra fences its eggs,  
Kee Mae and Doi Suthep  
Like a hen cares for its eggs  
Doi Suthep mountain range  
Just like an elephant...

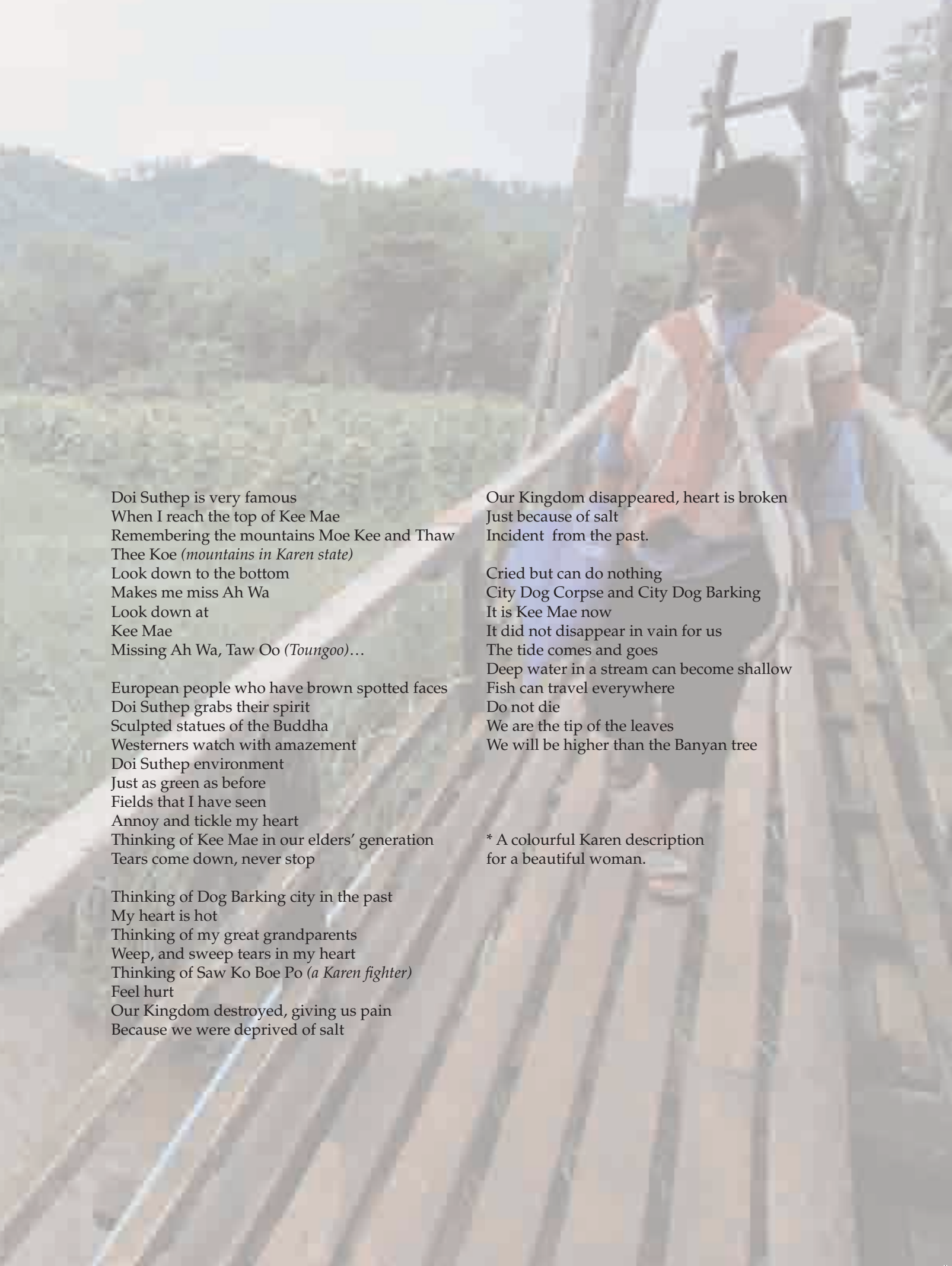
Dog Barking city and Kee Mae city  
This time I can catch you  
Step down slowly on your back  
I can catch you with this time  
Step down slowly on your chest...

Glance once at Lanna hospital  
Missing my father  
My father came and died here  
At Lanna hospital  
Thanks Lanna with my whole heart

In Thai history  
Kee Mae is the oldest city  
Oldest in everything  
Including history and culture  
Not only in the past generation  
But today

High white buildings appear in the sky  
"You tall" "Me tall." They are competing  
Developed in every way  
Including education and knowledge  
Siamese smiling people  
Respect and greeting, Sawadee  
Mu Yeh Pai's relative pretty faces  
Just like statues that people made  
Slim fingers and slim toes  
Stool good for curry, urine good  
for soup \*

Kee Mae city, born  
Seven hundred years ago  
Until the present time  
Kee Mae looks very young  
Attracts foreigners  
Easterners, Westerners and European people  
Kee Mae city's beauty  
Grabs foreigners' spirit  
Kee Mae decoration  
Westerners came and drowned in it...



Doi Suthep is very famous  
When I reach the top of Kee Mae  
Remembering the mountains Moe Kee and Thaw  
Thee Koe (*mountains in Karen state*)  
Look down to the bottom  
Makes me miss Ah Wa  
Look down at  
Kee Mae  
Missing Ah Wa, Taw Oo (*Toungoo*)...

European people who have brown spotted faces  
Doi Suthep grabs their spirit  
Sculpted statues of the Buddha  
Westerners watch with amazement  
Doi Suthep environment  
Just as green as before  
Fields that I have seen  
Annoy and tickle my heart  
Thinking of Kee Mae in our elders' generation  
Tears come down, never stop

Thinking of Dog Barking city in the past  
My heart is hot  
Thinking of my great grandparents  
Weep, and sweep tears in my heart  
Thinking of Saw Ko Boe Po (*a Karen fighter*)  
Feel hurt  
Our Kingdom destroyed, giving us pain  
Because we were deprived of salt

Our Kingdom disappeared, heart is broken  
Just because of salt  
Incident from the past.

Cried but can do nothing  
City Dog Corpse and City Dog Barking  
It is Kee Mae now  
It did not disappear in vain for us  
The tide comes and goes  
Deep water in a stream can become shallow  
Fish can travel everywhere  
Do not die  
We are the tip of the leaves  
We will be higher than the Banyan tree

\* A colourful Karen description  
for a beautiful woman.





## chapter 4

# challenges and

Virtually no one here  
has not been caught  
up in some or all of a  
terrible list of crimes—  
villages burnt, summary  
execution, rape,  
forced labour, forced  
portering for troops,  
and relocations—  
documented elsewhere  
in shocking detail.



### Memories

The border is a swirl of memories, a kaleidoscope of extraordinary contrasts between lives gone and life now. In a ramshackle dark wooden house in Sangklaburi, busy with a bustle of orphans and infants and weavers and family, and a boiling cooking pot forever on the go, one-time Miss Karen Universe laughs at the recollection of her old well-to-do life of parties and cars and complicated love affairs in Rangoon.

“Such a time! We had wonderful fun. And then...!” The next reel of memories shows the former glamour girl running from shelling on the border, surviving on wild vegetables in jungle hide-outs, helping a woman give birth under a shelter of drooping bamboo, and, for a time, running ‘Daisy’s Revolutionary Restaurant,’ before Karen bases near Three Pagodas Pass fell for good to the Burmese.

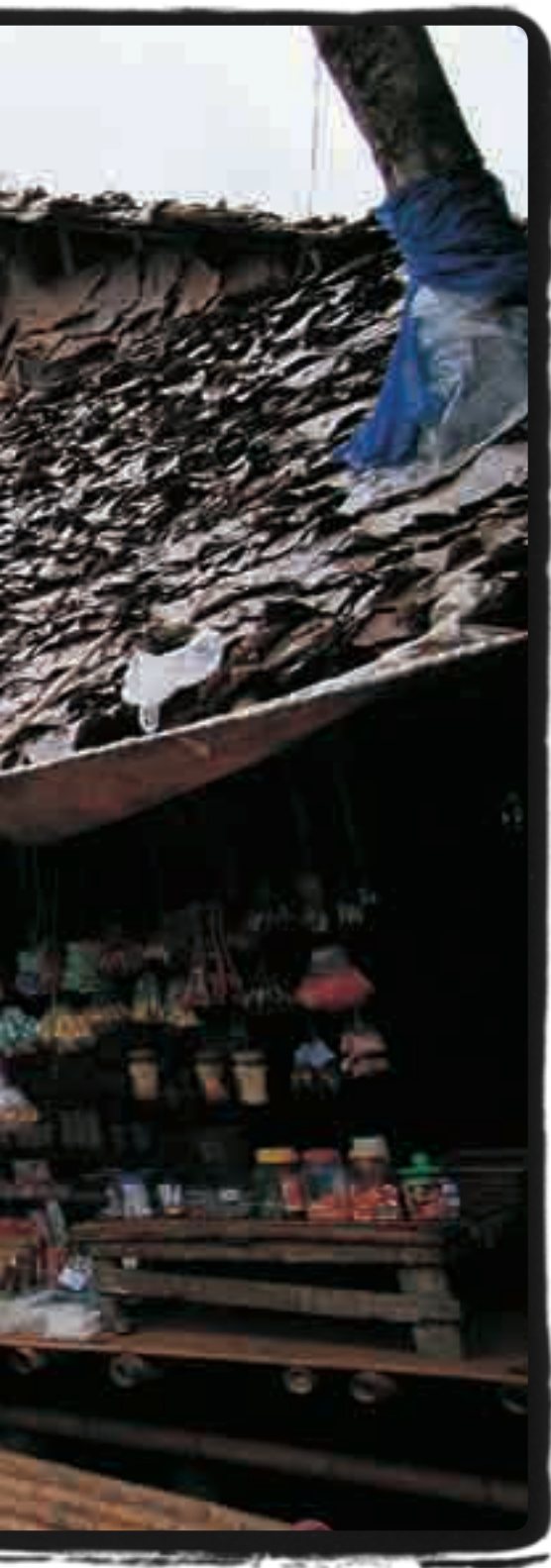
“No regrets—at least here, now, I am living in freedom, and I can still help my people,” laughs Daisy Dwe, whose weaving project

*(Above right) Daisy Dwe: ‘No regrets’;  
(Left) Paw Kyow Sein of Mae Ra Ma  
Luang camp—her family became  
refugees in Thailand in the 1970s.*





*(Above) A market area at Mae La camp, home to more than forty thousand refugees.*



supplying customers in Thailand and abroad provides vital income for vulnerable women.

Dignified, soft-spoken Thra Taw Pay rose to a senior position within the Burmese education system in a former life. "They liked me because I was obedient and disciplined. Mr Honest." Eventually, however, the ever-present suspicions over his ethnicity and a threat on his life pushed the ageing civil servant to the border. "At least here, I can be of use. It is good enough."

Thra Victor, lean and wizened, was once a senior agricultural official in the Delta region. Now he works on strategies to save the disappearing natural environment in Karen state.

A Karenni former judge sits with mouldering law books in Site 1 near Mae Hong Son. Burmese former students and democracy activists from Rangoon approach middle-age looking out at jungle peaks. 'James Bond,' the leader of Mae La camp, remembers travelling to Japan as a young champion boxer to represent Burma. "I never imagined that one day I would be a refugee."

Far more of the memories in the camps are of a simpler kind—of a time when the pleasurable rhythms of village life carried on undisturbed and unnoticed by anyone except the people who were there. And everywhere, there are the much darker memories. Virtually no one here has not been caught up in some or all of a terrible list of crimes—villages burnt, summary execution, rape, forced labour, forced portering for troops, and relocations—documented elsewhere in shocking detail.

## Costs

It is not the style in the camps to dwell on the pool of painful stories and memories that simmer just below the surface of everyday life. People work hard to spare each other the unnecessary rehearsal of inner troubles. With outsiders, they work to maintain a communal sense of dignity as palpable as it is fragile; internal community problems also mainly stay private.

"I don't like the refugee system! Being stateless, having no dignity, living on charity, it's against our national principles..." rails Micah Rollins, 81, of Mae La camp, who stays busy penning political pointers for the future and pithy analyses of the British "betrayal" of the Karen.

Daphne Tun Baw, 83, presents a fighter's take on setbacks. Her petite frame rises as she recalls one expedition. "Such lovely people I met. So kind. We would talk through the day, they would ask me all about my life, and I would teach them English. It was a lovely time!" she beams, eyes gleaming at the memory of the emergency trip to a hospital in a Thai town; a rare glimpse in seven years of the world outside the sixteen acres of Tham Hin camp.





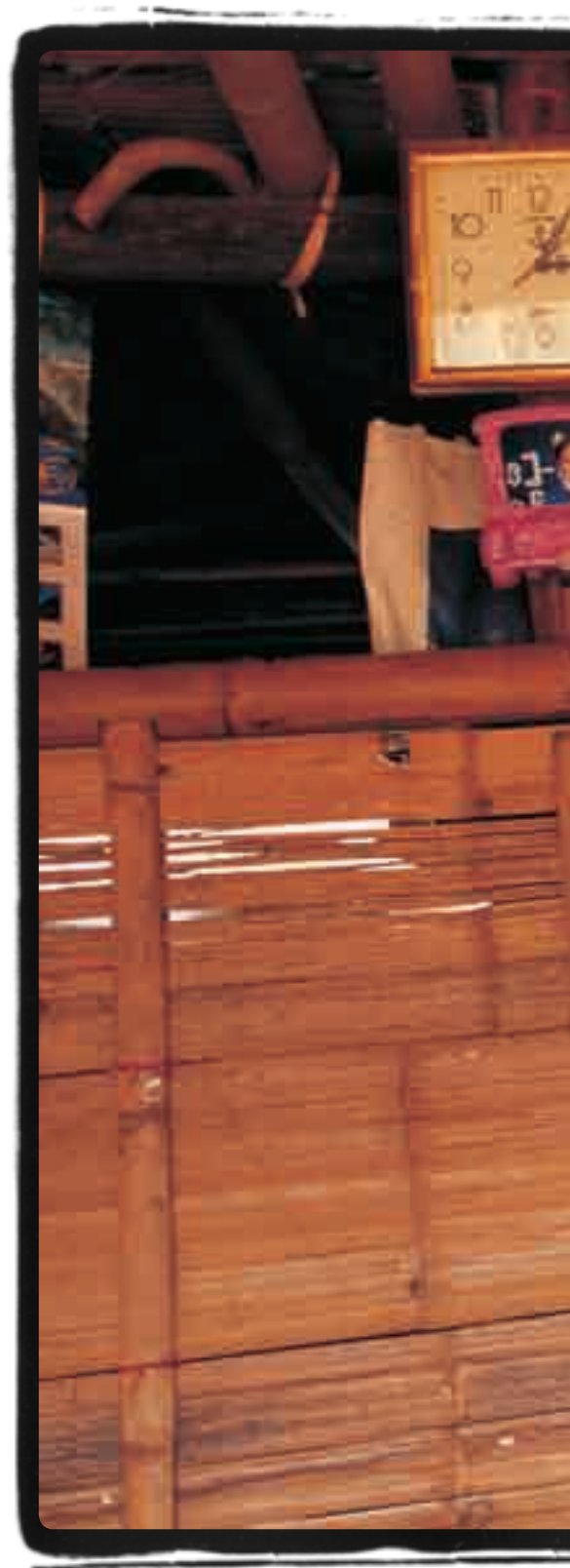
(Right) Micah Rollins:  
"I hate the refugee system!";  
(Main photo) Daphne Tun  
Baw is still teaching at 83.

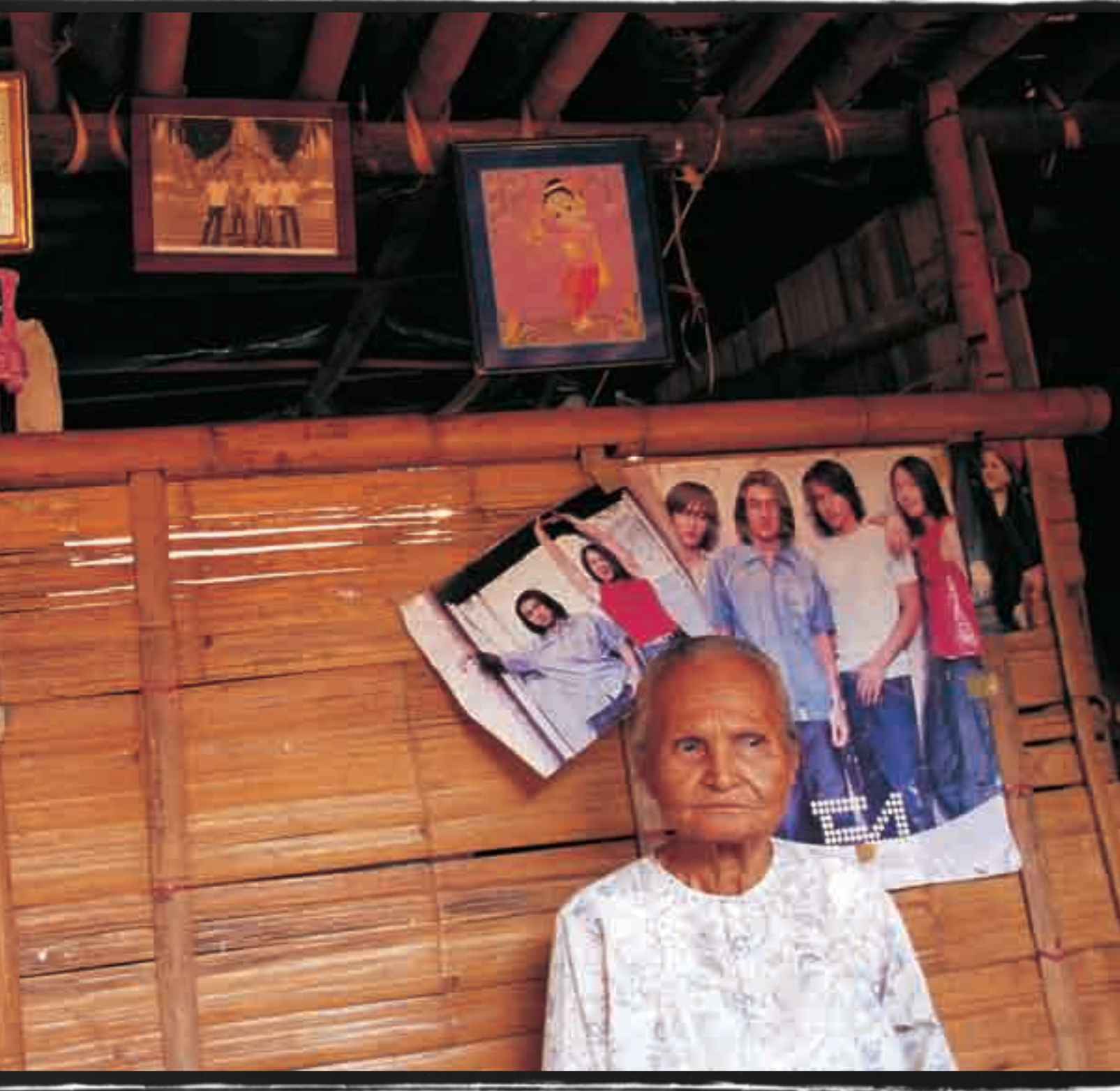
Daphne's previous trip, when she was 76, was the flight with other villagers from troops in Tenasserim in southern Burma. The group lost children to cholera on the difficult route. An onlooker described the exhausted villagers as 'pitiable' when they turned up in Thailand, where they faced an uncertain welcome. Undeterred, Daphne set out her stall. She recalls, "I started a school. I had a plastic sheet for the roof and a plastic sheet for the floor, and a cardboard box for a blackboard." The classroom wasn't technically allowed in the unofficial settlement, but Daphne prevailed against the official who pointed this out. "I told him it didn't matter about us elders, but our children have to be able to sing, and play, and learn. They must!"

Another time, she told an officer who was pouring cold water on her hopes of joining a son in America; "Never mind. It doesn't matter if you don't let me join my family; I'll see them soon enough anyway. In the next life."

Others are not faring so well in their struggles with the past, themselves and the 'refugee system.' As the years roll on in the camps, "there are more social problems, more alcoholism and drugs, more depression and domestic violence," says Thra Taw Pay.

Often it is those of the community who are not actually living in the camps, but are intimately involved, who reveal a personal response. "It makes me feel so sad and helpless, that this has gone on so long. I feel very stressed when I visit the camps, and so depressed when I come back, that for a few nights I don't sleep," says Olivia Tha Din, a community nurse and long-time carer for refugees in the Sangklaburi area.











*(Left) Nyi Pu Leh weaves Karen garments in her home; (Main picture) Daw Khin Mar Soe of the Muslim Women's Association of Burma at Mae La camp.*

"It would be all right to live like this for a few years... you could stand it fine. But when more and more years go by..." The sentence trails away. Daniel Zu, a charismatic personality, was a thirty-something teacher with a liking for books when he helped lead a village in Tenasserim to the border, and as co-camp leader at Tham Hin helped them cope with living for the first year on and under plastic sheets. Now he has just turned forty and is tired of death, suffering, and nothing changing. "As a refugee that's all you can be, a refugee." He stops, checks himself, smiles. "Shall we move on?"

As Daniel Zu takes a researcher around the camp, an elderly woman sitting on a balcony whose face is part eaten away by a kind of tumour patiently answers the visitor's questions. No, she doesn't know what it is, yes, it is painful, yes, she can only eat a kind of porridge, she replies in a factual tone as she strokes a pair of skinny kittens on her lap, before saying a polite goodbye when the visitor moves on. A half hour later, when the researcher happens to pass the balcony again, Ma Tu is no longer there. She has gone inside, it turns out, to weep in private.

## Women and work

Past the tiny balcony decorated with flowering plants, bolts of bright-coloured thread and the glow of light brown light filtering through bamboo slats lend a soft air to the house of Nyi Pu Leh, 31, who fled Mudraw district in Karen state many years ago. Everyone is at home, toddlers in Karen dress playing with their father as their mother winds expert fingers around a little loom strapped to her back.

The family, around whom the air seems to vibrate with a gentle warmth, makes a little stretch far. Nyi Pu Leh's husband earns 600 baht (\$15) as a health visitor in the camps, while her handwoven dresses bring in about seventy baht each. Each month she makes about three, for a total of 210 baht (\$5).



The Karen and Karenni are skilled weavers and their distinctive clothing is a core part of traditional culture. Women's groups, in partnership with the BBC and other NGOs, are working to maintain the old skills and help individuals earn a little extra income in the process. As well as supporting home workers like Nyi Pu Leh, a project with women's organisations is using expert weavers to train more people in the skilled art of working traditional wooden looms, and to supply longyis to all the residents of the camps. At Mae Ra Ma Luang camp, the fastest weavers can make five longyis in one day, earning 25 baht a piece. They come up with their own designs, based on traditional style, for the handsome pieces. "Store-bought skirts are cheaper but they're not the same quality at all," says Kee La Joh of the KWO.

*(Right) Little No Biko (Flat Head) is being taken care of at a KWO safehouse.*

Other projects organised by the KWO include sewing classes for young women, and training in a great variety of skills that vary from making cakes and snacks for sale, to human rights education and leadership.

For the practical-minded women's groups, lack of income is the bane of camp life. "The main problem for women is joblessness. Sometimes they can go out to work (in local farms), but it's very difficult and risky with no papers; you can get arrested. And the pay is very low—about forty baht a day, a bit higher in the garlic season. Men get a bit more," says Ah Dee, leader of the Karenni Women's Organisation (KnWO) in Site 1 near Mae Hong Son.

"Women's position is better now than before, but the main problem is that the women's groups have no income," says Le Le Win, head of the KWO at Mae La.

The issue of money is also one of community survival, the women say. Cash poverty is a major contributor to depression and rising family tensions. "There is a lot of domestic violence. It is of two types—verbal and physical. The first type, we don't really intervene. In the case of physical violence, we visit the family, try to educate and counsel the man. We ask him why he is doing this, we say it is not good for the children. We explain that he must help the family, that sometimes the woman is tired," says Ah Dee. In all camps, problems such as domestic violence are first tackled at a local level before being taken to senior camp leadership.

Daw Khin Mar Soe of the Muslim Women's Organisation of Burma in Mae La camp, says the two thousand strong group works mainly to provide information and support to members via a quarterly magazine. It also runs sewing classes, a nursery school and literacy programmes.

Women's groups say their toughest job is trying to take care of the most vulnerable members of the community; the 'poorest of the poor,' the mentally ill, the elderly, and orphans. At a KWO 'safe house' in Mae La camp, little No Biko (Flat head), age unknown, is scooting around on her bottom, a good deal better now than when she was discovered in another camp, virtually abandoned, full of

The issue of money is an also one of community survival, the women say. Cash poverty is a major contributor to depression and rising family tensions. "There is a lot of domestic violence. It is of two types—verbal and physical."



sores, and grubbing for food in a pigs' trough. She can be angry and aggressive, the women say, but today she is even standing up occasionally—she cannot walk—and attempting to play with a younger child. Also taking shelter in the safe house are a young woman who was trafficked at the age of eleven in Burma from one grim 'owner' to the next, a sullen woman of thirty who "never speaks" and "hates all men," and a young widow with children who arrived recently and is homeless and frightened.

Somehow, a place must be found for the community's most vulnerable people. There are orphanages and boarding houses in some camps, and also "the people have their own way," says a young member of the KWO. There was a man at Mae Ra Ma Luang who had lost his mind and "scared people" with his inchoate wanderings, she remembers. "Then someone gave him a job as a sweeper, and a roof, and now he is fine, he stays quiet in himself with his job."

As the camps grow old, so do the occupants. Some were already elderly when they fled to Thailand, others have passed from middle to old age living in places with names like 'Section 1' or 'Zone B.' Many need special care, and the women's groups are hoping to one day set up homes for them.

## By word of mouth

The vicissitudes of flight and the refugee lifestyle throw up constant challenges to human relationships, with often extraordinary results. Le Le Win's late second marriage after a long period as a widow was one such surprise.

"I knew my daughter in Nu Po camp was feeling bad, so I went there. There were three or four of us in the truck, and I was the only woman. On the way the police stopped us. The driver of the truck, a Burmese widower older than me, was worried about what would happen to me, so he told the police I was his wife. They didn't really believe him, but eventually they said ok and let us go on. Then news got out that we were married.

"We were married by word of mouth. I was forty-two, a widow. He was forty-seven and a widower. My daughters said I would have fewer problems if I were married—and now we've been together for eight years."

It wasn't about love, she says. "He helped me, so I also had pity for him. We are not from the same ethnic group, we're not the same as each other. My first marriage was arranged and my husband died after three years. Until this day, I don't know the meaning of love."





"We would like a special home for the Muslim elderly who do not have a good place now. About thirty people are in real need of it at the moment," says Daw Khin Mar Soe.

Daw Theing La, 60, echoes that. After taking in a homeless elderly man six months ago, she then had to marry him in order to avoid gossip. Now she is supporting eight people on camp rations and the little extra she earns selling nuts. There are days when she is depressed, and then she turns to prayers and tears. Yet, after quitting Rangoon in 1990 after seeing too much "shooting, death and bloodshed" during the uprising of 1988 and after, she says she is "happy" where she is. "There is freedom here, and a community. It makes me happy to help other people."

Though women's representation in the camp leadership committees is rising slowly, it is still not strong enough, some say. Others feel they have enough on their hands. A Karenni woman recalls a proverb. "If you want good news, think about your love life. If you want peace of mind, grow a plant. If you want to worry about yourself, work in politics."

## Spiritual beliefs

The camps are dotted with mosques, churches, temples and less obvious animist structures, reflecting a wide variety of forms of spiritual expression.

U Sein Tin Aye, head of the Karen Cultural Group and a leader in Mae La camp's 20,000-strong Buddhist community, is also a spiritual healer in the animist tradition. "We believe not in God but in our forefathers and foremothers. Every year we have a ceremony to show veneration to them. They are still somewhere, still living, looking to help and support us. It is no definite place where they are, but it is somewhere."

His door is open to anyone with a physical or spiritual problem. Among his current cases: "A Thai Karen who is suffering pain all over and has been depressed for a year. Also a woman who is having fits, problems with speech and swelling on her face. It appears to be a problem of the occult, some kind of witchcraft."

U Sein Tin Aye's personal code as a healer; "You must be disciplined and clean in every part of living, in your mind and your body. You can never allow bad thoughts, you must always control your character and be clean."

Mae La's five to six thousand strong Muslim community is also well established, its first members having crossed into Thailand twenty years ago when the Karen villages where they lived were attacked. "It was the same for us; we couldn't stand the persecution of our houses, farms, land. The SPDC often burnt our mosques and put up pagodas instead," said one elder.



(Top) Muslims at prayer in Mae La camp;  
(Middle) A Christian church at Site 1;  
(Below) U Sein Tin Aye, Buddhist leader  
and healer.

Christian groups include Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists and Roman Catholics, and on Sunday mornings the camps ring out with the sound of children singing at bible schools.

The community has schools, mosques, a thriving market, and youth groups, as well as the women's group. Its oldest member is a 90-year-old who "took three days to walk here with a stick five years ago." There are about five marriages a month.

Christian groups include Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists and Roman Catholics, and on Sunday mornings the camps ring out with the sound of children singing at bible schools.

Says Baptist leader Reverend Simon of Mae La, "We keep ourselves busy doing things for children and young people. The thing is to stay busy. Do not focus on problems, or you will have no aspirations."

## The safe house

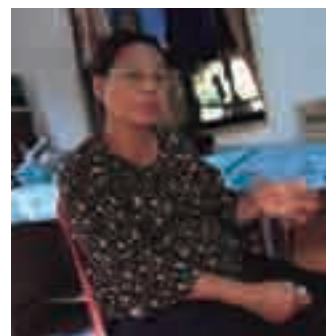
Outside the camps, the border area is a temporary home to many other displaced people. Among the most vulnerable are the mentally ill and those with other severe disabilities who do not have family members to care for them.

Paw Lu Lu, 56, (top right), a refugee herself, has been a mother figure to over a thousand people who have found shelter at a safe house supported by the BBC and others near Sangklaburi over the last eleven years. Most have ended up here after spending periods of time in the Immigration Detention Centre (IDC) in Bangkok before being transported to the border.

Residents this year include an HIV patient from Thailand who feels he cannot return to his village, a Cambodian woman (right), a Malay and an Indian, as well as Burmese and ethnic people from Burma. Residents who are able can earn their own living taking part in the project's weaving and sewing activities. Others help Paw Lu Lu in the home's extensive vegetable gardens.

Though many people's stories are indescribably sad, there is humour in the house—even, sometimes, romance. This year two couples have married.

Says Paw Lu Lu, "In my life we have had so many problems, when we had to flee all the time in Burma and saw so many people suffering and being tortured. We all pitied each other but often we couldn't do anything for each other because we were all in trouble. That is why I am happy to help the people here. We know each others' difficulties."





## Learning and teaching

There are many energetic and dedicated young teachers in the camps, working for about 500 baht (\$12) a month. The most motivated have a sense of being part of something bigger than themselves—their community's future. "Without education, children will have no chances in life, and our people will not thrive," said one young teacher at Mae Ra Ma Luang camp.

Some are glad to have the chance to teach at all. When they compare themselves to their counterparts attempting to work in almost impossible situations among displaced communities in the ethnic areas across the border, they feel fortunate, they say.

For community leaders, finding futures for bright young people just starting out in life is a priority. Increasing efforts are being made to provide them with more options, and to that end a former camp leader has set up the Karen National Further Education Programme.

Says Thra Peter, whose programme's policy is to take in students from families of all political persuasions, "Young people don't want weapons anymore. Working with the community, learning skills, doing community diplomacy, that's the way ahead now."

Students in the programme learn subjects like English, Science, Math, the Environment, computers and community management. Some go on to receive placements in organisations in Chiang Mai, Bangkok and even abroad. All must commit to return and share their skills with the community.

At Mae La Oon camp, students were asked in an informal straw poll what they would like to do in the future. Six said "teacher," eighteen said "medic," two wanted to be engineers, one aimed to be a lawyer, one a soldier, and one a politician.

Ray May, 26, has come from university in Rangoon to teach at the school. "In Burma the education system isn't very good. There are more opportunities here. This is a better place for me."

## Youth

"Young people here are the same as anywhere else. They're restless, they want to work, to do things. They don't want to stay idle.

"We try to find things to contain them, or else they'll try things like drugs and drink," says Mu Nay Too, chairperson of the Karen Youth Organisation at Mae La. That means encouraging participation in sports events, athletics, social events and assisting in camp festivities and celebrations.



(Top) Ray May, a teacher at a further education college at Mae La Oon camp;  
(Above) Creative recycling by members of the Karen Youth Organisation at Mae La camp.

## Keeping a record

Lashed by pelting monsoon rains, clinging to a hillside under tall trees, the small darkroom at Mae La Oon camp makes an arresting picture quite apart from what emerges from its developing tanks.

Here, young Karen are learning camera skills in order to tell stories—about their personal lives, and their culture and community. “We are photographing our day to day life—and recording Karen history,” says Hai Nay Htoo, co-ordinator with the Karen arm of the US-based AjA Project (an acronym for a Spanish phrase meaning ‘supporting self-sufficiency.’)

Students have created fascinating images based on Karen mythology and on their own dreams and experiences, some of which have since been re-interpreted as brilliant quilts. In response to community demand, they are also taking family portraits.

AA PHOTO



“We also have an environment programme,” adds Yi Yi Win. “We do trainings in gardening—growing flowers, vegetables and fruit. People have so little space, they don’t know how to use it. We’re also doing education on environmental issues like the destruction of the forest and waste management. And we recycle things. Plastic bags are made into ropes, orange juice boxes become decorative fish. And out of tin cans we can make hats.”

## After twenty years—the future

The strange limbo that is life in a refugee camp has presented people with many psychological as well as practical challenges. Life cannot be experienced only as ‘on hold’ for years on end; despair would be the result. So people try to stay busy, to buoy each other up with jokes and humour, and to live out private and community relationships that are inventive and new as well as rooted in the old cultures that give life its flavour and meaning.

But the question of the future is always there, hanging over every day existence. There are a multitude of opinions about what it might, should, or could bring.

Obviously, virtually every one wants to go home, and hopes for the political solution that would enable that to happen. Some see cause for slight hope in talks during 2004 between Karen political leaders and the Burmese military government. Many more refugees express deep distrust, and fear, around Rangoon’s intentions. The National Convention process, which has been presented as an inclusive discussion of the country’s political future, is widely perceived as ‘insincere.’

“We want some kind of settlement that would enable us to go back, but we don’t trust that the Burmese government has changed. We can’t return home if we are still in fear of our lives, or of forced labour and all the other abuses that are still happening,” says a senior community member.

Since few feel they can afford to be optimistic that the necessary guarantees for their safe repatriation are within sight any time soon, efforts in the camps remain, for now, focused on the present. Says a motivated young member of an ethnic women’s organisation: “We feel that our way of life and our culture are under threat. So we will continue to work in every way we can to save them.”

For Saw Paw Kay, a jobless father and amputee, the truth boils down eloquently to this; “We are a people in trouble, but we survive.”

*(Overleaf) A message on a large blackboard in the centre of Tham Hin camp calls attention to the refugees’ concerns over the future.*



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## chapter 5

# last words

### Zipporah Sein

(Left) Zipporah Sein is secretary of the Karen Women's Organisation, which works for the needs of women throughout the border camps and beyond.

In 2004 it released a report titled 'Shattering Silences' documenting the rape of Karen women by Burmese soldiers. In the same year, it has been particularly concerned about the prospects ahead for camp dwellers.

"We are concerned about the future, especially in relation to any policies that might develop about resettlement issues. Women are worried and they need to have more information. We don't know what the authorities are thinking and we need to prepare.

"It is a worry if there will be resettlement programmes. If educated people from the community leave, it will cause more problems for the community that is left. We need to prepare so that everyone has a chance, including the sick and the vulnerable and the disabled. We need more information."



(Left) A steep walk at Mae La Oon camp.





## Daniel Zu

(Above) Gesturing towards a map of the Mergui/Tavoy area in Burma, Daniel Zu, 40, a Karen and a co-leader of Tham Hin camp, is clear about why he and his community have been stranded in Thailand for the last seven years. "Our whole area in Karen state is being cleared to make way for new businesses—logging, palm oil plantations, pipelines, roads—under the SPDC."

Daniel Zu, a former university student in Rangoon and member of the Karen Education Department, fled the Mergui/Tavoy region with thousands of others when Burmese troops entered their areas in 1997. Flipping through a photograph album showing the youthful smiling faces of a graduation class at his former rural mission school, he points out at least seven he knows have since died—the causes varied from sickness to suicide by hanging while internally displaced, to rape by Burmese soldiers. One young man had joined the KNU and had died in combat.

Life in the refugee camp is increasingly difficult as the years roll on, says Daniel Zu. "The lack of privacy leads to social instability. Living in these conditions, people are affected psychologically, especially when they consider their future. MSF say they are seeing more people coming to the clinic for general consultation, but they cannot diagnose them with a specific health problem, so finally they diagnose depression.

"It gets to me too. I try to control my conscious mind, but subconsciously it affects me. I am committed to being here, and to serving people, but it hurts me to be always depending on others' hands, to be breathing with others' noses. We would like to live as human beings, with rights, but in practice... we are looked down upon by all sides. I know my shoes. I know my position. A refugee is a refugee. Even if they say we have rights, in practice it is very different to being a real human being."

## Thra Victor

(Right) Thra Victor is a leader of the Karen environmental group, Kesan (Karen Environmental Social Action Network). It trains camp dwellers, including young people in the schools, in agricultural and garden techniques, and environmental awareness. It is particularly concerned about the loss of the natural environment in Karen state.

"Logging is on the increase. It is a big problem, especially in DKBA areas. The forests are disappearing, and so are the wild animals. There are no wild elephants left, no rhino. One thing about the DKBA is that they are mainly vegetarians, so they don't eat the animals. But after deforestation the villagers can get them and eat them anyway. Now the SPDC is encouraging people in central Burma to plant trees, but they don't care about the ethnic areas.

"Villagers inside are very interested in how to preserve the forest, but it is very difficult for them now. When the SPDC come, they have to run away and plant in new areas. Slash and burn is the tradition, which is difficult for the environment. But in the old days people didn't cut big trees and they would leave fields for seven years after planting. Now people don't follow the old ways, or they can't, because of the war. On the positive side, people are planting fruit trees like mango and jackfruit in the cleared areas."







## New arrivals

Forced relocation policies in the ethnic areas inside Burma continue to put enormous stresses on the population. Hundreds of thousands of people living in resettlement villages and on the run in jungle areas are barely able to survive and live in constant fear. Many continue to try to enter Thailand.

*(Left)* Tee Moh, 28, from Tree Dah in Karenni state, came to Site 1 in April 2004, after her husband died the previous year.

"I don't know why he died, just that he was coughing. I was pregnant then with my youngest child. After he passed away, everything was very difficult. With no husband, I was afraid to go to work in the farm, afraid of the soldiers. I had no one to protect me. I was always afraid, and I couldn't work to help my family, we couldn't even get clothes or blankets. So we came here. It was frightening on the way. We slept at night under bamboo trees and my little girl lost her shoes so her feet got sore. When we arrived here, people gave us clothes. Now I am staying with my mother who came four years ago, but we need our own house."

*(Overleaf)* A teacher at the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College at Mae La camp.



*(Above)* In early 2004 the family of Aung Htu, 41, Clem Mya, 43, and their son Pleh Reh, 13, fled to Site 1 from a village in the Loikaw area of Karenni state.

"We came because of oppression from the Burmese soldiers," said Aung Htu, who is himself a Burman married to a Karenni. "We walked for twelve days, just sleeping by the side of the trails, under tents made of leaves. My wife was sick for two days, she couldn't climb the mountain."

"You had to do forced labour for the soldiers. For ten or fifteen days in a month, whole families had to work on roads, or building base camps for the troops. Some soldiers are nice but more are bad. I used to be a farmer but I had to stop three years ago, you had to pay too many taxes. If you registered a pig, the soldiers would sell it and give you only a little money. If you sold the pig yourself, you would be arrested. I got beaten once by four soldiers, they said they suspected me, but they really wanted money."

"Our son is very happy to be here. Now he can receive an education."



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## Former students

*(Above)* The camps are still home to a number of the student activists who fled central Burma following a brutal military crackdown after the 1988 pro-democracy uprising. Members of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) and the Network for Democracy and Development (NDD) are based at Mae La Oon camp near Mae Sariang.

Thein Lai, 38 deputy executive director of the NDD at Mae La Oon, says the group is now focused on capacity building and news gathering. Myint Hein of the ABSDF adds, "The fight for human rights and democracy in Burma goes on."

Many former student activists have now been resettled in third countries like the United States, and around sixty at Tham Hin camp are waiting to join them.

## Shan family

*(Right)* The camps are home to a wide variety of ethnic groups. Thailand does not officially recognise ethnic Shan people as refugees and most Shan civilians who enter Thailand must work as illegal migrants mainly in farms, orchards and construction sites. But some, like 65-year-old Ba Wan, entered the camps along with groups like the Karenni. She lives with her family in a tiny hut on a winding hillside lane at Site 1 near Mae Hong Son.

"We came from an area near the Salween river in Shan state, near the Karenni area. That was six years ago. It is all right here, at least we have enough to eat."



















## See you later

*(Left)* One thing that never changes in the camps is the element of surprise. In the face of disability—whether from landmines or other accidents—people carry on as best and as independently as they can. In this photo, the family of double amputee Saw Doh Wah, 38, is seen around the wheelchair he left behind four weeks ago to travel alone to a nearby forest where he lives in a home-made shelter and tends his goats.

## Olivia Tha Din

*(Above)* Olivia Tha Din, 67, is the daughter of a prominent Karen political leader of the 1950s, Saw Tha Din, who gave each of his six children names from Shakespeare beginning with the letter 'O'. The other siblings were named Olive, Oliver, Ophelia, Orlando and Oswald. "I asked him once why he did that, and he said 'O is like zero. If you add something to it, it will have a value. Otherwise it has no value.'" The children were expected to find that something of value to give meaning to their names.

Olivia left Rangoon and came to Sangklaburi area in 1962, when Burma was taken over by a military dictatorship led by General Ne Win, and her life has centered around helping Karen people in trouble ever since, as a community health nurse and in countless other ways.

The Kwai River Christian Hospital in Sangklaburi where she works is today seeing more and more people coming from Burma with multiple resistant TB, and HIV/Aids. "This month there were eight cases with TB, other months there are usually between three to five. We had three new Aids cases this month. One has died already.

"In the last six months we have also been seeing more suicides, all of them young women. They drink kerosene or alcohol or insecticide. Some take rat poison or sleeping pills. We can save them if they get to the hospital quickly, but some have died.

"It makes me feel very sad and hopeless for the people, for the future. It has gone on so long and the generations are changing. I feel very sorry for young generation, we don't know what will happen to them."





## Reverend Simon

(Above) Reverend Simon, 65, is principal of the Kawthoolei Karen Baptist Bible School and College (KKBBSC), at Mae La camp. The school was founded in Karen state in 1983 and moved to Mae La in 1990.

Reverend Simon and his family left a comfortable life in Rangoon after the city became “very dangerous” following the 1988 uprising. “There were killings and prisoners being released and poison in the drinking water. Life was very insecure. Finally my wife agreed, ‘ok we will go to the jungle and help the Karen.’” The family worked in the KNU’s headquarters in Manerplaw until it fell in 1995 and they eventually moved to Mae La.

Today, the Bible school and college is educating 455 students with 62 teachers throughout the camps. Students learn subjects such as political science, economics, history, education and English as well as religious topics. Two hundred orphans are being looked after, thirty of them in Reverend Simon’s house due to lack of space.

“I am satisfied with this life. It makes me happy to see young people develop here, in spite of all the difficulties and hardships and restrictions,” says the principal who was honoured with a human rights award in 2000 by an international Baptist organisation.

## Annabel Mubi Gomez, 26

(Right) Mubi’s family, members of the Padaung tribe, came to Thailand from Karenni state in 1989, when she was seven years old.

The family had spent years before constantly switching locations to avoid Burmese troops, and Mubi became an early acquaintance of the “normal” problems of the ethnics’ difficult way of life—malaria and “serial diarrhea.” At seven she made the stand that was a first sign of the independent-minded spirit that she was to become. “It was time for me to wear the rings (the heavy brass rings that some Padaung women wear around their necks). I tried it—but after two days I insisted I wanted it off. My mother said all right, but then I would have to go to school. I went off in a boat and was gone for months.”

Today Mubi is a student leader who works to provide further education for young people who have finished high school in the camps. “We have helped five hundred already. In 2003 we started a leadership course course, teaching management, vocational skills, community leadership, English, science and maths. It is so important that young people have knowledge and the opportunity for further study. Otherwise they will lose their hope.”



LION  
THE KING OF THE LIONS





## chapter 6

# the Burmese Border

By Jack Dunford, Executive Director

In 1984 it would have been inconceivable to any of the people involved in setting up the Burmese Border Consortium that it might still be functioning twenty years later. The decisions made, the arrangements set up and the relationships established were common-sense responses to what we were all told would be a short-term problem. None of us would have imagined their consequences.

It is fascinating and instructive to look back over the years to see how crucial some of those early decisions were; how they proved to be the solid base for a future which would see the refugee situation grow beyond recognition and the programme subjected to all kinds of challenges.

In 1984 it would have been inconceivable to any of the people involved in setting up the Burmese Border Consortium that it might still be functioning 20 years later.

### 1. In the beginning there was CCSDPT...

The Committee for the Coordination of Services to Displaced Persons in Thailand (CCSDPT) was set up in 1975 in response to the influx of refugees from Indochina following the Vietnam War. Initially an NGO response, the RTG immediately recognised it as an appropriate vehicle through which to administer and control humanitarian assistance. All NGOs providing assistance to the Lao, Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees became members and, at its peak, CCSDPT had over fifty member agencies. CCSDPT's main activity was to hold monthly meetings that were attended by the member agencies, representatives of concerned Thai authorities, UNHCR, ICRC, IOM and other international organisations, plus donor embassies and other interested parties. The meetings became an important forum for information sharing as well as the coordination of services.

Karen refugees began arriving in early 1984 and, on 27/28<sup>th</sup> February, the MOI invited CCSDPT members to two briefings in



which they requested basic humanitarian assistance. Since this was expected to be a short-term problem, a decision had been made not to involve UNHCR or the international community. NGOs were asked to provide food and medicine only, nothing of a developmental nature, nothing which would encourage new refugees to come or stay any longer than necessary. MOI wanted to avoid creating any draw-factor.

The problem was small and the refugees were quite self-sufficient and in the early years just three main NGOs were involved, Medecins Sans Frontiers (together initially with Medecins Du Monde and Monaco Aide et Presence) who provided medical services and BBC and COERR who covered food assistance and other miscellaneous support. CCSDPT set up a Karen sub-committee in April 1984 to coordinate activities and report to MOI. When Karenni and Mon refugees started to arrive in 1989/90 the name of the Karen sub-committee was changed to the CCSDPT Burma sub-committee.

As refugee numbers began to increase, other NGOs began providing assistance informally and in 1994 MOI officially extended the NGO mandate to include sanitation and education services. Since then, MOI has gradually allowed the education mandate to expand, including vocational training and agricultural projects. Since 1997, CCSDPT has been working almost exclusively with Burmese refugees and today there are nineteen members, seventeen of which have active programmes as shown in the chart (see page 107).

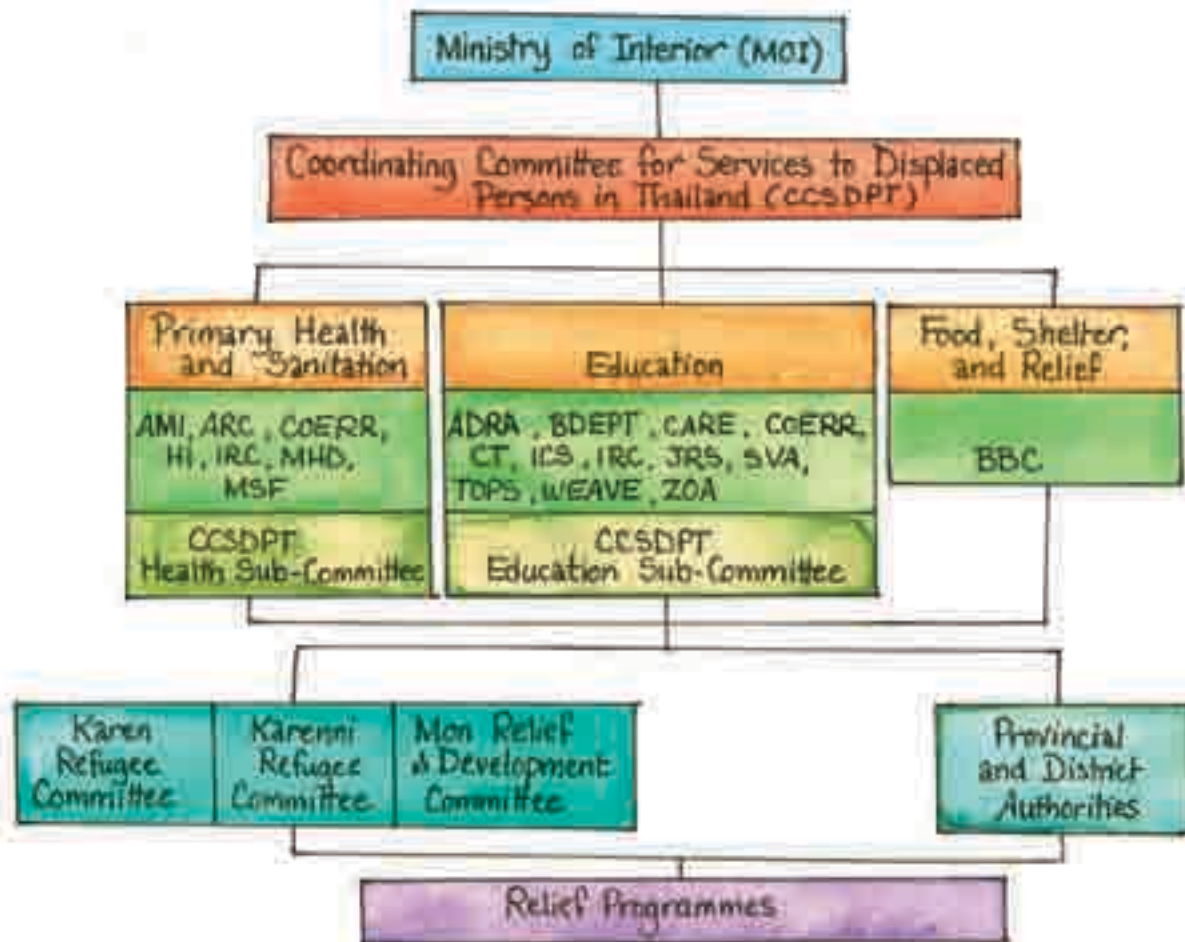
The CCSDPT still holds monthly information sharing meetings at the British Club in Bangkok and has health and education sub-committees. It also has additional coordination meetings with UNHCR including a protection working group and regular NGO/UNHCR/IO meetings. Over twenty years the CCSDPT members have delivered US\$200 million worth of food, shelter, health, sanitation and education assistance (as shown in the table and graph on page 108).

The problem was small and the refugees were quite self-sufficient and in the early years just three main NGOs were involved, Medecins Sans Frontiers (together initially with Medecins Du Monde and Monaco Aide et Presence) who provided medical services and BBC and COERR who covered food assistance and other miscellaneous support.

## 2. Then there was BBC

At the March 1984 CCSDPT monthly meeting several individuals reported that they had already visited the border and had distributed some small-scale assistance. In response to MOI's request of February 27/28th, members were invited to join a field trip to Mae Sot on 5/6th March to assess the situation. The party comprised Warren Scales (Seventh Day Adventist World Services), Philip Passmore Dr. Barbara Ford, Khun Pricha (World Vision), Jake Buhler (Mennonite Central Committee), Chana Karawanon and Jack Dunford (Church of Christ in Thailand). This group reported back to a meeting at Christ Church on 7th March which included Rev Ian Bull (Christ Church), Bob Coats (Thailand Baptist Missionary Fellowship), and Dr Diny van Brugen (ZOA Refugee Care Netherlands). It was during this field trip and a subsequent

## STRUCTURE OF RELIEF ASSISTANCE



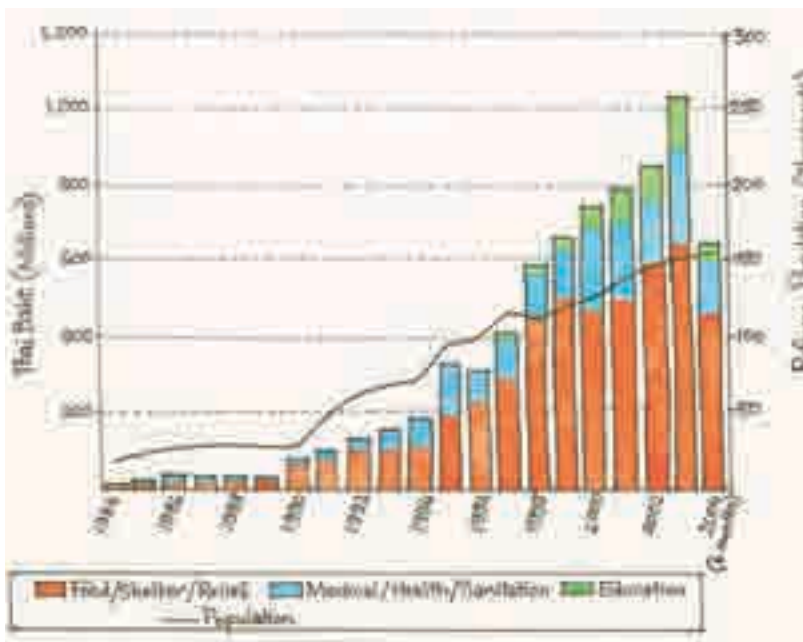
- ADRA - Adventist Development and Relief Agency
- AMI - Aide Medicale Internationale
- ARC - ARC International
- BBC - Burmese Border Consortium (Diakonia, IRC, NCA, TBMF, ZOA)
- BDEPT - Burma Distance Education Programme-Thailand
- CARE - Community Addiction Recovery and Education Project
- COERR - Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees
- CT - Consortium Thailand
- HI - Handicap International
- ICS - International Christelijk Steunfonds Asia
- IRC - International Rescue Committee
- JRS - Jesuit Refugee Service
- MHD - Malteser Germany
- MSF - Medecins Sans Frontieres - France
- SVA - Shanti Volunteer Association
- TOPS - Taipei Overseas Peace Service
- WEAVE - Women's Education for Advancement and Empowerment
- ZOA - ZOA Refugee Care The Netherlands



1984 TO JUNE 2004

# ESTIMATE OF TOTAL BBC AND OTHER NGO ASSISTANCE

Year	Food, Shelter, Relief (Thb. M)	Other	Medical, Health Sanitation (Thb. M)	Education (Thb. M)	Total (Thb. M)	Year-End Population
1984	3	2	5	-	10	9,802
1985	4	2	5	-	11	10,145
1986	3	4	7	-	14	10,428
1987	11	3	10	-	24	10,670
1988	18	4	10	-	32	10,956
1989	22	5	8	-	35	11,241
1990	33	5	10	-	48	11,500
1991	62	5	14	-	81	11,800
1992	75	6	20	-	101	12,100
1993	85	6	35	-	126	12,344
1994	98	3	54	-	155	12,602
1995	175	12	122	-	309	12,888
1996	188	12	88	-	288	13,145
1997	291	6	110	13	420	13,448
1998	343	6	118	21	528	13,815
1999	481	3	124	30	638	14,062
2000	472	3	189	56	720	14,314
2001	574	4	192	56	826	14,612
2002	581	3	188	115	887	14,858
2003	670	1	253	115	1,039	15,108
2004	686	-	245	30	961	15,343
Total:	4,714	116	1,713	484	7,027	



meeting that BBC (initially the Consortium of Christian Agencies, CCA) was established. It was agreed that TBMF would open a bank account and that everyone would try to raise funds to support the Consortium programme.

The MOI expected the refugees to return after three months when the rains came and so none of these organisations expected to be involved for long. There were no formal agreements, no criterion for membership, convening meetings or making decisions.



*(Top) Refugees inspect the new blended food being introduced by BBC in 2004;  
(Above) Refugees supplement camp rations by growing or foraging for vegetables.*

The programme grew inexorably and BBC had to start getting organised. The first six-month report was written in 1992, the first professional audit carried out for the 1992/3 financial year, and the first external evaluation was undertaken in 1994.

The CCA met immediately after CCSDPT Karen sub-committee meetings and anyone could attend and join in consensus decision-making. Other regular contributors in the early years were CAMA, International Christian Aid, Japan International Volunteer Centre, Japan Sotoshu Relief Committee, Food for the Hungry International and Compassion. There was no long term budget or funding plan, individual members would simply chase funds and hope that enough would come in. It continued this way until 1989, before the first coordinated appeal was made for US\$950,000 for 1990. In 1991 BBC recruited its first administrator; until then all the accounts having been compiled by TBMF and the chairperson. The name was changed to the Burmese Border Consortium.

The programme grew inexorably and BBC had to start getting organised. The first six-month report was written in 1992, the first professional audit carried out for the 1992/3 financial year, and the first external evaluation was undertaken in 1994. Meetings were still held informally however, with no official membership and no minutes.

In 1996 the system was under stress. The programme had now reached US\$8 million with grants being received from eleven governments, but funding was coordinated at a personal level by the chairperson. BBC faced its first major cash-flow crisis. It was decided to call a donors meeting and to draw up BBC's first ever 'Structure and Regulations' (S&R) which set out requirements for membership, procedures for meetings and the duties of the board and director. The first donors meeting was held in Amsterdam in October 1996, hosted by Dutch Interchurch Aid and ZOA. For the first time donors were asked to 'pledge' their support for the next year. The S&R were approved and became effective 1<sup>st</sup> January 1997. Jack Dunford vacated the Chair to Steve Curtin of JRS and became full time director. The board comprised the country representatives of five member agencies, Church of Christ in Thailand, International Rescue Committee, Jesuit Refugee Service, Thailand Baptist Missionary Society, and ZOA Refugee Care Netherlands.

Since then there have been annual donors meetings and BBC's programme has continued to grow and become more sophisticated. By 2000 BBC's Advisory Committee was concerned that the management of BBC was over-stretched and the governance system too weak for such a large operation. As a result a Governance and Management Structure evaluation was carried out in early 2003. This recommended clearer separation of the governance and management functions, and a strengthening of BBC's middle management.

During 2004 BBC has recruited new staff to strengthen its organisational structure and, after an exhaustive consultative process, the current five members of BBC plus five new members agreed to register BBC as a Charitable Company in the United Kingdom. The new Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) will comprise ten members:



Christian Aid, UK  
 Church World Service, USA  
 DanChurchAid, Denmark  
 DIAKONIA, Sweden  
 ICCO, Netherlands  
 International Rescue Committee, USA  
 National Council of Churches in Australia  
 Norwegian Church Aid  
 Thailand Baptist Missionary Fellowship  
 ZOA Refugee Care Netherlands

New Memorandum and Articles of Association and Bylaws have been drawn up as the legal framework of TBBC.

### 3. The BBC programme; changing with the times

#### a) Beginnings

On the first trip to the border in March 1984 the NGOs visited several refugee camps that had just been built or were under construction. They were simple villages in the forest or close by. There was plenty of water, an abundance of bamboo and other building materials, and it was clear that the refugees were quite capable of getting on with their own affairs. The NGOs asked camp leaders what they needed. Invariably the answer was "Rice." "Is there anything else?" they would ask. After a pause, "No, just rice." And then after another probe, "Are you sure there is nothing else?" a tentative reply, "More rice?" Rice is survival on the Burmese border.

In negotiating how much rice to supply, BBC had to take into account the fact that the refugees were receiving significant although unpredictable donations from many different sources and were still self-sufficient to a degree. The refugees were still able to harvest some crops across the border and were free to go into the forest to gather roots and vegetables. Some were also able to work on Thai farms and earn money to buy other needs. In the first year therefore, BBC agreed to guarantee that the refugees would receive half of their calculated total rice needs i.e. they were judged to be 50 percent self-sufficient and BBC would add to donations received from elsewhere to maintain the 50 percent support level.

These refugees were scarcely on the international radar and international emergency assistance was still somewhat unsophisticated. Nobody called for needs assessments, base-line surveys or, heaven-forbid, Logframes! There were no demands for international standards. Such terms as EVIs (extremely vulnerable individuals) had yet to be coined. It was simply assumed that the refugee communities would take care of their elderly, handicapped, single parent families and unaccompanied minors in accordance with their own traditions and cultures.



BBC ARCHIVE

*(Top) Preparing bamboo for construction at Tham Hin camp; (Right) Marking a ration book on rice distribution day; (Above) Bob Coats, TBMF; Jenny Bassett, BBC; Waren Scale, ADRA; Lydia Thamla, KRC; Wallace Ye, KRC. Mae Sot, 1985.*



There was also a high level of trust. The refugees had their own community and administrative systems and were well able to work out how to store and distribute supplies, some say, using British Quartermaster procedures. They were from ancient, rural cultures with strong moral, family and community values and somehow exuded trustworthiness. There was a joke that the Karen were the worst liars in the world. In those innocent days the NGOs were little concerned about assistance being misappropriated and, apart from casual visits, did not consider it necessary to carry out any kind of methodical monitoring or checks. These were formative days when real partnerships were forged. It was all consistent with the Thai Government's policy of keeping staff presence and assistance levels to a bare minimum.

The programme was simplicity in itself. Donors were very trusting and impressed with its efficiency. BBC could buy rice at the local shop, which arranged delivery to camp, and the job was done. No talk in those days of international tendering or professional quality control.

Each year after that, the Burmese Army would launch dry season offensives and overrun more ethnic territory. Numbers would increase and the refugees found it more and more difficult to find their own food. BBC agreed to give salt and fish paste which refugees would otherwise have to purchase, and by the mid-1990s, gradually increased the rice ration to 100 percent. BBC also made annual distributions of blankets and mosquito nets, essential items in areas where it can get surprisingly cold in the cool season and where malaria is endemic.

By the mid-1990s not much had changed to the programme, although it was growing every year with more arrivals. There were over twenty-five small camps, all more or less self-managed and all receiving similar basic levels of assistance. BBC still had only three field staff on the border, each solely responsible for all the camps in his area without even any administrative assistance. But by now BBC was spending millions of dollars and was becoming more reliant on government funding. The first evaluation of the programme was carried out in 1994. The evaluation was very supportive but pointed out the dangers of having such low staff presence and working with such a high level of trust. This led to the formalising of staff field checks and an embryonic monitoring process.

A feature of the programme from the beginning was also to respond to requests for assistance from local Thai authorities and communities. These usually come in the form of help after emergencies such as floods or fires but also include support for school children's lunches, village rice banks etc. The camps are often near poor Thai communities and support of this kind did much to help improve relationships between the refugees/NGOs and the Thai communities/authorities.





## b) Growing Aid-Dependency

The situation on the ground changed dramatically when the border fell to the Burmese Army between 1995 and 1997. The small village-like camps were consolidated into bigger camps that required much more control. The Thai Government placed security around the camps and started preventing refugees from leaving them for work, to cut building materials or forage for roots and vegetables. These much larger camps had become a threat to the environment. In short, the refugees would now become much less self-sufficient, much more aid-dependent.

With the creation of a very large camp at Mae La in 1995, the MOI asked BBC to provide cooking fuel and bamboo and thatch for building new houses to stop refugees destroying the forest. These became regular new items in BBC's programme and in each subsequent year these items were increased and extended to other camps. For the last few years, BBC has been supplying 100 percent of these items.

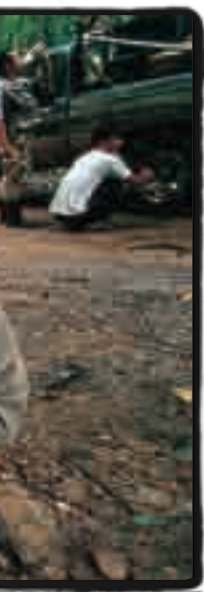
Nutrition also became a concern. Now that the refugees were becoming dependent on BBC's food basket and they had fewer opportunities to earn income or to forage, it was important to ensure that they were getting an adequate diet. A nutritional assessment was carried out for the first time in 1997 and, as a result, cooking oil and mung beans were added to the standard food basket to ensure an average energy intake of 2,100 kcals/person/day as recommended by the World Food Programme and UNHCR.

As the refugees lost their self-sufficiency, there were other needs to be met as well. It became more difficult for them to find other necessities themselves such as clothing, cooking pots, and soap. BBC began soliciting donations of used clothing and today imports enough for at least one item of warm clothing for every refugee each year. More recently BBC has also supported a women's project which weaves one Burmese style 'longyi' for each woman and man in alternative years. Children's clothing was purchased for the first time in 2004 and it is hoped that in future these might also be produced in the camps. BBC also now makes regular distributions of cooking pots and supports the production of cooking stoves in the camps.

## c) Donor Requirements and International Standards

The Thai government eventually gave UNHCR a role on the border in 1998, which brought full international recognition to these people as refugees for the first time. Although UNHCR's mandate was purely for protection, with no responsibility for services or administration of the camps, it was also mandated to identify 'gaps' in services. For the first time consultants began to look more carefully at these camps and judge them according to international standards and practices. UNHCR also began a process of encouraging NGOs to play a role in protection as a 'shared responsibility,' pointing out that there were many aspects of





*(Left) BBC field assistant Arthorn Srikeeratikarn prepares a vehicle for a rainy season road trip; (Below) field assistant Boonchoo Anutrakiri at the BBC office at Sangklaburi.*



assistance programmes that had protection implications. This was when the issue of EVIs was raised and gender and equity issues were also given much more prominence.

The donor world was in any case becoming much more sophisticated and demanding. New international standards such as the Sphere Project were now being aspired to and, as a result of scandals elsewhere, accountability was becoming a much more important issue.

In a short period of time BBC had to respond to many trends and pressures. Since 2000 BBC has introduced competitive tendering and professional quality control for the majority of its purchases, and has introduced more methodical monitoring controls and checks on the delivery and distribution of supplies. These have been subject to extensive evaluations and audits and currently BBC's monitoring procedures and internal controls are being upgraded again to meet exacting donor standards. The challenge in all of this has been to maintain the self-respect of the refugee committees and the integrity of BBC's relationship with them. BBC has made great efforts to involve them in all aspects of redesign of the programme and to explain current demands for accountability. It has been important for them to understand that demands for more monitoring are not because of mistrust, but that they themselves must also be transparent and accountable. The refugees will still retain full responsibility for handling supplies, but there will be a verifiable paper-chain to satisfy donor requirements.

BBC now produces performance indicators against which the programme can be gauged. The most important of these relate to the nutritional status of the refugees. Detailed nutrition surveys were carried out in 2001/2 which revealed that although the refugees were receiving enough food in terms of energy requirement, there were serious carbohydrate/protein imbalances and micronutrient deficiencies, resulting in significant levels of chronic malnutrition.

BBC is currently addressing these problems through two major initiatives: firstly, by introducing blended food to the basic food basket, and secondly by increasing the refugees' own capacity to grow nutritious vegetables. Blended food is a wheat flour mix to which vitamins and minerals are added and this will have been introduced to all camps by early 2005, following extensive testing and education this year. The Community Agriculture and Nutrition Project (CAN) has been developed from a refugee initiative which was experimenting with intensive vertical gardening using indigenous plants and natural fertiliser and pesticides. Training has been conducted border-wide, demonstration gardens set up in most camps, and seeds are being distributed to households. Although water and space requirements limit the ability for refugees to contribute significantly to their overall food needs, this project promotes self-reliance and is maintaining and expanding agricultural skills which will be invaluable when the refugees are able to return to Burma.



One outcome of the UNHCR protection training is that BBC has had to re-think its policy of providing minimum assistance where that meant that refugees were obliged to go out of camps to supplement supplies, thereby subjecting themselves to the dangers of arrest or assault. This applies particularly to cooking fuel and building supplies, and BBC has been increasing the rations provided so that all basic needs are covered.

#### **d) IDPs: Research and Documentation**

After the Burmese Army overran the border between 1995 and 1997 new refugees began to tell stories of forced village relocations. The Burmese Army was ordering whole tracts of villages to move to relocation sites, usually with little or no notice, and with threats of shooting on sight and confiscation of property if their orders were ignored. No assistance or compensation was offered and villagers either moved into the relocation sites where they were treated as potential insurgents, subject to curfew and used for forced labour, or fled into the jungle.

It soon became clear that this was a systematic, widespread operation, bringing misery and suffering to hundreds of thousands of people and yet, virtually unknown to the outside world. BBC attempted to pull together reports coming in from different indigenous groups on the border and by 1999 was estimating as many as 700,000 internally displaced persons. These figures were initially greeted with scepticism. The problem was that there was no access to these areas from inside Burma and no confirmation of any large-scale problem could be verified from inside the country. The information BBC was collecting was fragmented and coming from sources which others might consider to be biased or self-interested.

Clearly there was a major problem and IDPs represented a potentially unlimited flow of new refugees. It was important to get credible information so that the situation could be understood and addressed. BBC therefore started to work with the ethnic groups to help systematically collect and compile reliable data. This resulted in a report titled 'Internally Displaced People and Relocation Sites in Eastern Burma,' October 2002, in which BBC estimated some 2,500 villages had been destroyed or abandoned since 1996, affecting one million people.

The IDP situation has now been generally acknowledged and BBC continues to support surveys and research the issues. An updated report will shortly be produced, suggesting that by now at least 3,000 villages have been destroyed or abandoned. The situation is constantly changing, but of the one million people displaced by SPDC, there are at least 77,000 IDPs still in SPDC-controlled relocation sites and 85,000 IDPs living in hiding.

#### **e) Twenty years**

BBC's programme in 2004 is almost unrecognisable from that in 1984. A simple rice supply programme has been replaced

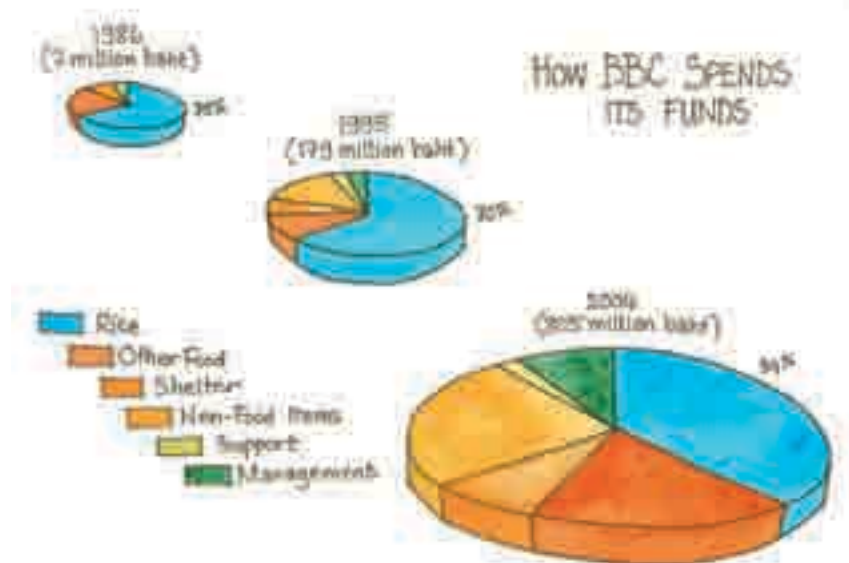




(Above) Members of BBC staff in 2002; (Left) Refugees help unload a rice truck in 1987.

by a fairly sophisticated food aid programme which aspires to international standards. BBC has had to employ more staff and more technical staff. BBC now needs experts in nutrition, food security, gender issues, procurement and quality control, and of course the administration is now also much more sophisticated, with proprietary accounting software, accrual accounting and on-line field data entry. But the principles of 1984 remain. BBC still tries to respect the refugees' own skills and integrity and still tries to maintain a minimum staff. During this last year BBC has been working with the committees to find equitable ways of reimbursing refugees for their services and also making sure they have the necessary resources to administer their camps. BBC believes it is important to take every opportunity to strengthen the refugees' own capacity and will endeavour to keep them involved in all future developments of the programme.

The diagram below shows how BBC's programme has developed over the years. In the early years 75 percent of expenditures were on rice, compared with only 34 percent in 2004. The programme remains extremely efficient, with management costs representing only 5 percent of expenditure and the whole programme costing only baht 14/refugee/day (USD 34 cents at current exchange rates.)



The Burmese Army was ordering whole tracts of villages to move to relocation sites, usually with little or no notice, and with threats of shooting on sight and confiscation of property if their orders were ignored.

## 4. Funding BBC

When the NGOs first visited the border in 1984, they understood that they would have to fund any activities themselves. Since the Thai Government had made a decision not to involve the UNHCR, there was no international funding mechanism. All of the agencies represented on that first field trip that led to the setting up of BBC were from Christian organisations and, each 'member' committed to try to raise money from its own constituency. The initial funds therefore came exclusively from Christian organisations and churches.

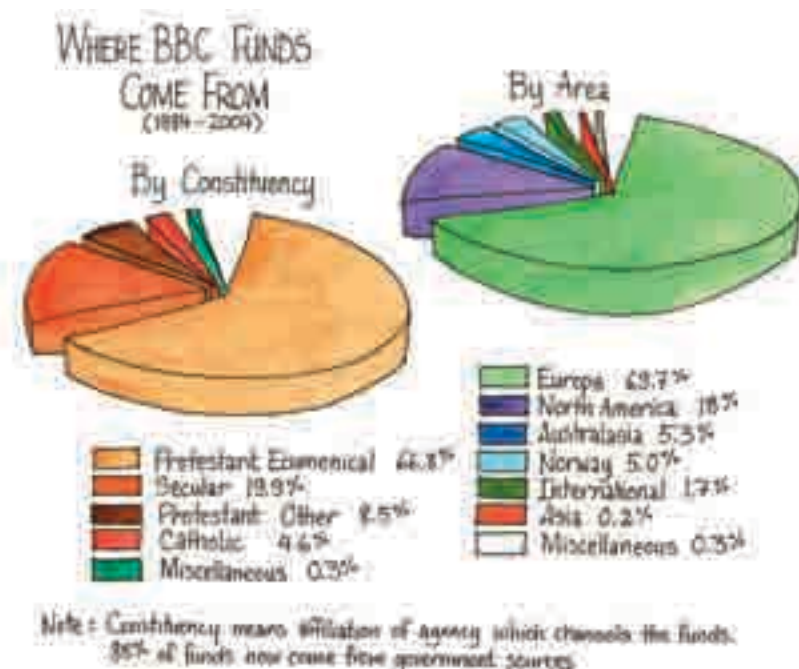


Very early on the Swedish Baptists applied for Swedish government funds and for the first few years BBC was funded by this combination of church and Swedish government funding. After the democracy uprising in 1988 Burma received much more international attention and BBC's programme was growing too big for church funding. Other BBC donors began requesting government funds and over time these became BBC's main source of funding. In 2004 BBC's governmental funds come from Australia, Canada, Denmark, European Union, Great Britain, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands and the United States of America. It was always the consortium's philosophy to seek money from as many donors as possible as an insurance against changing priorities/capacity within individual donors, and to meet ever growing demands of the programme. The CCA changed its name to BBC in 1991, which also broadened its funding appeal to other kinds of donors.

Over the years many governments have asked BBC why it continues to channel funds through BBC's partners in their countries, rather than direct. BBC's answer is always the same. BBC prefers to do it this way firstly because it reduces administration demands on BBC, with the national organisations taking responsibility for any specific reporting needs and day to day contacts, particularly important where these need to be in other languages than English. But equally importantly, funding through national partners engages them in advocacy on Burma/refugee issues and gives BBC potential access to human and other resources. The general model therefore is that national NGO partners still request funds from their governments on BBC's behalf and channel the funds accordingly.

The pie graphs below show the sources of BBCs' funding since 1984, both by geographical area and by constituency. And the table lists BBC's donors since the beginning.

In 2004 BBC's governmental funds come from Australia, Canada, Denmark, European Union, Great Britain, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands and the United States of America.



## BBC DONORS 1984 TO JUNE 2004

Agency	Baht	Agency	Baht
ACT Netherlands/ICCO/European Union/ECHO	932,419,042	Caritas France	2,680,817
/Dutch Govt	84,782,954	Refugees International Japan	2,539,994
/ACT/ICCO/Stichting Vluchteling	65,261,306	Australian Churches of Christ	2,197,323
Sub Total	1,082,463,302	Caritas Japan	2,172,021
Diakonia/Baptist Union Sweden/SIDA/Swedish Govt	878,059,655	German Embassy	1,388,100
International Rescue Committee/BPRM/USAID/US Govt	564,696,611	Community Aid Abroad	1,325,076
ZOA/Dutch Govt	376,657,733	DOEN Foundation Netherlands	1,313,455
Christian Aid	93,720,870	Caritas Austria	915,441
/DFID/UK Govt	166,418,565	People in Need Foundation/Czech Republic	893,160
Sub Total	260,139,435	Baptist World Alliance	880,717
DanChurchAid/DANIDA/Danish Govt	256,373,112	Christ Church Bangkok	880,129
Norwegian Church Aid/Norwegian Govt	229,704,947	Cooperative Baptist Fellowship	800,783
National Council of Churches Australia/AusAID/Australian Govt	206,509,970	Caritas Korea	798,613
Inter-Pares/CIDA/Canadian Govt	115,145,164	ADRA	563,350
Church World Service	104,073,468	World Council of Churches	543,700
Caritas Switzerland/SDC/Swiss Govt	103,313,665	Austcare	512,181
European Commission (Fund for Uprooted People)	78,370,000	Food for the Hungary International	500,000
UNHCR/EU	77,929,800	Burmese Relief Centre	436,500
Development Corporation Ireland	39,933,938	Australian Baptist World Aid	421,664
Bread for the World	32,610,080	Japan Sotoshu Relief Committee	400,000
Jesuit Refugee Service	20,982,458	CAMA	387,327
Caritas Germany	18,796,071	Baptist Internal Ministries	375,105
Swiss Aid/SDC	18,355,325	Caritas Hong Kong	345,135
Trocaire	14,851,916	YMCA	295,086
CAFOD	9,332,300	Development and Peace Canada	275,078
Caritas Australia	8,554,861	Baptist Missionary Alliance	256,950
World Food Programme	8,500,000	Marist Mission	250,700
Misereor	8,456,101	Norwegian Embassy	248,400
World Vision Foundation Thailand	8,407,530	Lutheran Mission Missouri	198,952
Open Society Institute	8,397,608	International Church Bangkok	180,865
Archbishop of Sydney (AIDAB)	6,724,875	Canadian Baptists	177,375
Canadian Council of Churches/Canadian Govt	6,584,688	Mission Ministries/Evangelical Christian	177,054
Catholic Relief Service	6,398,318	Mrs. Rosalind Lyle	172,998
MHD/ECHO	5,635,273	Japan International Volunteer Centre	150,000
Inter Aid	5,553,400	Presbyterian Church of Korea	124,900
Baptist Missionary Society (UK)	5,458,845	World Relief	114,497
Caritas New Zealand/NZAID/NZ Govt	4,769,109	Bangkok Community Theatre	102,444
United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel	4,548,587	Glaxo Co. Ltd.	100,000
American Baptist Churches/International Ministries	4,237,183	Thailand Baptist Mission	100,000
Compassion International	3,234,698	Weave	100,000
International Refugee Trust	3,226,046	Miscellaneous	1,314,627
Anglican Church of Canada	3,162,569	Interest	11,547,046
Japanese Embassy	3,030,000	<b>Total (THB):</b>	<b>4,632,336,204</b>

Note: This table only includes transactions through the BBC accounts.

It does not include donations in kind via BBC except for a donation of 8,500,000 baht worth of rice from WFP in 1999.



Although most of BBC's funds are now institutional, it still continues to receive funds from individuals and churches. For the BBC staff, these contributions are often the most encouraging and uplifting. They are the responses of people moved by the situation and who are putting their own money into the programme.

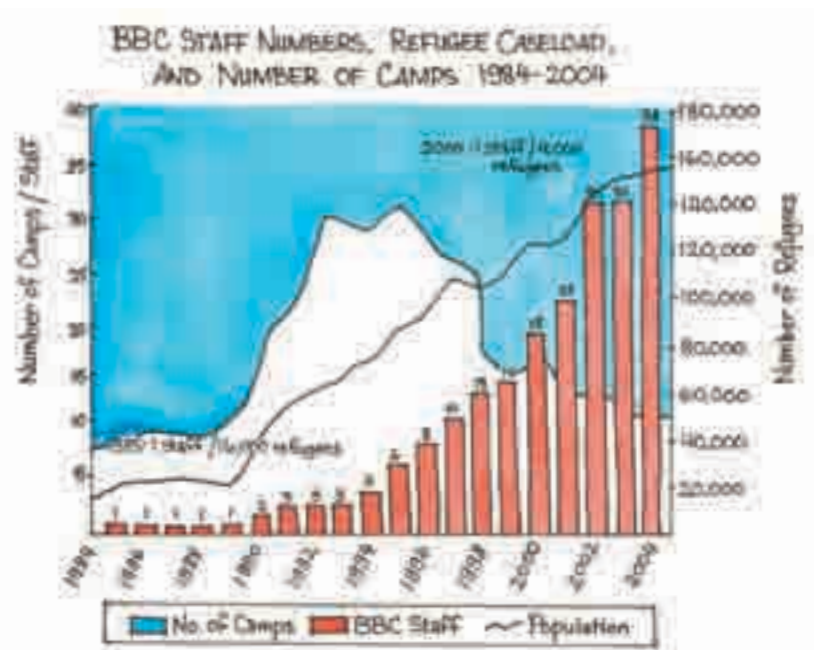
## 5. BBC Staff , Board and Advisory Committee Members

### Staff

BBC began its work in 1984 without any staff. Dennis Tidwell, a Seventh Day Adventist missionary offered to purchase rice and unwittingly effectively became BBC's first field coordinator. Jack Dunford became chairperson of BBC from May 1984 and acted as de facto director until 1997 when he officially became full-time director.

Dennis Tidwell was helped out early on for a brief period by John Coats, son the TBMF Mission Secretary. But it was Jenny Bassett, a young CCSDPT intern, who was first sent into the field on a volunteer's stipend, renting a house in Mae Sot and hitching lifts to the camps with whoever would take her. Jenny was succeeded by Brian Hintz and then Victor Newman and they took care of all the Karen camps. Brian was the first to be assigned a BBC vehicle.

The first large influxes of Karenni and Mon refugees arrived in 1989 and 1990 respectively. The Karenni camps were supported from Mae Sot (a mere three hundred kilometres to the south!) but Jenny Bassett returned to set up a programme for the Mon and some Karen refugees in Sangklaburi. Jenny was replaced by Sally Thompson and moved to Bangkok to be BBC's first administrator.



### A Faithful Donor

In 1991 BBC received a cheque from an unknown donor named Rosalind Lyle in the south of England and during his next vacation Jack Dunford visited her to find out why a woman thousands of miles away wanted to support refugees in Thailand.

Ms Lyle explained that her parents, Mark and Gwenllian Day, lived in the Tavoy area of Lower Burma from 1926 to 1940, while she was left in the "loving care" of her grandparents and aunt. "My father Mark was General Manager of the Anglo-Burma Tin Company's mine at Heinda... While they were there they seem to have had a good relationship with local people, Burmese and Karen, as well as with the Indians who were mainly employed on the mine." Her parents, she continued, "developed a special interest in, and liking for, the Karens."

"As a Christian, I am concerned for the victims of injustice in all parts of the world," Ms Lyle wrote. "Any contributions I can make to the Burmese Border Consortium I regard as a memorial to my parents, Mark and Gwenllian Day."

Ms Lyle continues to make regular contributions to the BBC.

## BBC STAFF 1984-2004

1984-	Jack Dunford <i>Dennis Tidwell / John Coats (1985)</i>	2001-	Chonrada Venin (Pom) <i>Amornthip Amaraphibul (2001)</i> <i>Pricha Koonoo (2003)</i> Noraphan Touythong (Meow)
1985-	Jenny Bassett (1986, '90-'92)	2002-	Apatchana Neumthaisong (PakPao) Arthorn Srikeeratikarn (Art) Ratchanee Kularppana (Da) Benjamas Kantanan (Tieu) Kannikar Kammano (Oye) Maneerat Thamachatkiri (Aeh) Nanthawan Suttiaprapa (Toyting) <i>Catherine Diaz (2003)</i>
1986-	Brian Hintz (1990)	2003-	Jacob Thomson Suthida Anurakpongpana (Min) Duncan McArthur Pachon Kiri-Amrung (Sam) Anna Voss Noppawan Chaihom (Leena) Aungkie Sopinpornraksa Warunyu Thodsapolkiri (Tod) Boonchoo Anutrakiri (Mek)
1990-	Victor Neuman (1997)	2004-	Pattarnaporn Paisitmanee Wong (Lek) Tim Moore Farukkh Toirov Awatsaya Panam (Hseng Muay) Pisamai Luthoo (Mai) Sakha Chuttiwatarnsuk (Richard) Thitirat Borirakwana (Bet)
1991-	Sally Thompson		
1992-	Adam Caro (1999)		
1994-	Ashley South (1997, 2002)		
1995-	Paul Taylor		
1995-	Somwang Boonsri (Oye)		
1996-	Urunii Fung-Atsakul (2004)		
1997-	Ben Walker (1999) Chusak Kirsattayakul <i>David Allen (2003)</i> <i>Seree Jupoh Tee (Tee) (2000)</i> Sudjai Yanawan		
1998-	Jay Lubanski (2000) Lahsay Sawwah <i>Michael Wibunsin (1999)</i>		
1999-	Justin Foster Philip Galvin Namthip Kerecomron (Paeh) Sophin Mahasing (Anne) Vaughan Smith		
2000-	Andrea Menefee <i>Jampee Youngsang (Mai) (2001)</i> <i>Madalae Sitkingtang (Fern) (2002)</i>		

\* Jack Dunford served as BBC Chairperson and de facto director from inception to 1997 when he became fulltime Director.

\*\* Dennis Tidwell volunteered to buy rice for BBC in 1984 and was briefly assisted by John Coat.

Sally was replaced by Ashley South in Sangklaburi and took over a coordinating role whilst Adam Caro was recruited as administrator. Paul Taylor arrived in 1994 to set up the Mae Sariang office to cover the growing number of Karen and Karenni refugees in Mae Hong Son province.

Remarkably then, BBC recruited just seven staff in its first eleven years (but a maximum of four at any one time, plus the two early volunteers and its part-time chairperson) but had established four offices, and was taking care of over eighty thousand refugees in about twenty-five camps.

The rest, as they say, is history. As the programme expanded, offices were opened in Kanchanaburi and Mae Hong Son and since 1995 BBC has employed another forty-eight staff making a grand total of fifty-five. Of these, thirty-eight are still currently employed, demonstrating remarkable loyalty and long-term commitment.



## Board Members

BBC was not formally organised until the last quarter of 1996 and had no fixed membership. Since then there have been annual appointments and an elected chairperson;

## BBC BOARD MEMBERS 1996-2004

Rev. Dr. Sint Kimhachantra, CCT, 1996-2000  
Helen Dalton, IRC, 1996-1998  
Fr. Steven Curtin, JRS, 1996-2000 (Chairperson 1996 to 2000)  
Marshall Peters, TBMF, 1996  
Jan Jansen, ZOA, 1996  
Edythe McCarty, TBMF, 1997, 2002  
Hendrien Maat, ZOA, 1997-2000  
Duane Binkley, TBMF, 1998-2001, 2003- (Chairperson 2001-2002)  
Lori Bell, IRC, 1998-2001  
Magnus Stenberg, DIAKONIA, 2000-2001  
Fr. Andre Sugijopranoto, JRS, 2000-2001  
Pornthip Ratanakeree, NCA, 2001-2003  
Margareta Koltai, DIAKONIA, 2001- (Chairperson 2002 to -)  
Marg Burchell, JRS, 2001-2003  
Jay Jackson, IRC, 2003-2004  
Michael Alexander, IRC, 2004-  
Wessel Huisejes, ZOA, 2004-  
Margrethe Volden, NCA, 2004-  
**Bert van der Waal, ZOA, 2000-2004 (Chairperson 2002-2003)**  
CCT Church of Christ in Thailand  
DIAKONIA, DIAKONIA Sweden  
IRC International Rescue Committee  
JRS, Jesuit Refugee Service  
NCA, Norwegian Church Aid  
TBMF, Thailand Baptist Missionary Fellowship  
ZOA, ZOA Refugee Care Netherlands

BBC registered as a charitable company in the United Kingdom under the name of the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC) in September 2004 with five additional member agencies. The first annual general members meeting of the TBBC will elect a board of directors from the ten member agency representatives.

*(Right) BBC field coordinator  
Justin Foster helping with tree  
planting at Mae Ra Ma Luang  
camp.*

## Advisory Committee Members

Under the 1996 Structure and Regulations, an Advisory Committee was elected by the annual donors meeting to represent them between meetings;

## BBC ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS, 1997-2004

Urban Carlbacker, DIAKONIA 1997-1998  
Eileen Maybin, CA, 1997  
Radha Wickremasingha, CA, 1997-1998  
Gwen Willis, NCCA, 1997  
Stephanie O'Connell, CAFOD, 1998-1999  
Malcom McArthur, NCCA, 1998-1999  
Fancesca Roberts, IRT, 1999-2002  
Magnus Stenberg, DIAKONIA, 1999  
Rick Santos, CWS, 2000-2003  
Johnny Thorsen, NCA, 2000  
Jamie Isbister, NCCA, 2000  
Carolyn Kitto, NCCA, 2001  
Evert van Bodegom, ACT Netherlands, 2002  
Caesar de Mello, NCCA, 2002  
Bishop Ian George, NCCA, 2002  
Elske van Gorkum, ICCO, 2003-2004  
Dominic Brain, CA, 2003  
Hans-Christian Poulsen, DCA, 2003-2004  
Erol Kekic, CWS, 2004  
Ray Hasan, CA, 2004  
Carlos Ocampo, NCCA, 2004  
  
ACT Netherlands  
CAFOD, UK  
Christian Aid, UK  
CWS, Church World Service, USA  
DCA, DanChurchAid  
DIAKONIA, Sweden  
ICCO, Netherlands  
IRT, International Refugee Trust, UK  
NCCA, National Council of Churches in Australia  
NCA, Norwegian Church AID

The advisory committees were primarily responsible for raising the governance issues which resulted in the registration of the new TBBC in 2004. Seven of the ten organisations which were represented on the Advisory Committee between 1997 and 2004 have joined the new TBBC.















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