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Overcoming adversity: displaced people take the first steps home

“Home is where the heart is”, says a common proverb. And this seems to have the driving impulse for Saw Da Wei* and his family when deciding to return to their home in south-east Myanmar.

“We were missing our home and relatives” Saw Da Wei admits. “Also, the situation was peaceful enough for us to return”.

Recent developments in Myanmar, including a series of political and economic reforms and ceasefires between the Government and ethnic armed groups, encouraged Saw Da Wei, his wife and their four children, to take the long-postponed decision to return to their place of origin in a small village in south-east Myanmar.

Twenty years ago, Saw Da Wei became an ‘internally displaced person’ or ‘IDP’, fleeing to a nearby village because of conflict between the Myanmar military and an ethnic armed group. There, he settled down, married and started a family. But Saw Da Wei kept thinking of home.

Along Myanmar’s eastern border, decades of conflict between the government and a number of armed groups resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians. Many fled to seek refuge in Thailand while others moved to safer locations within the country.

Some 120,000 Myanmar refugees still reside in nine refugee camps along the border in Thailand. The number of IDPs in south-east Myanmar has always been difficult to capture due to the vastness of the region, difficulties in accessing conflict-affected

areas, and the fluidity of population movements, but estimates suggest the numbers are in the hundreds of thousands.

Recently, small numbers of IDPs like Saw Da Wei and refugees from Thailand have started to return to their home villages in Myanmar. Often they just pay a short visit to assess the conditions and see whether return is an option worth considering. Given the original circumstances of their displacement it can be a difficult decision to reach.

In certain places, years of armed conflict have left their mark: the cultivable fields may be contaminated with landmines, houses are destroyed, access to basic services is limited, and livelihood opportunities are lacking. Protracted, bitter conflict and memories of previous unsuccessful peace initiatives mean that trust in the peace process will take time to grow.

In the case of Saw Da Wei’s family, their yearning for home was stronger than the uncertainties of return; and the family took the big step! Returning home, they came face to face with the poor conditions in which most villagers live, but they also rediscovered the immense solidarity, community support mechanisms, and help from national and international humanitarian organizations, including UNHCR.

In Saw Da Wei’s village, UNHCR staff aim to help community members and returnees by distributing basic items such as blankets, plastic tarpaulins, kitchen sets and other items.

“As you can see, people are very poor in this village and did not bring much with them when they returned” commented a local inhabitant, adding “it gets quite cold here during the winter, especially during the night, and the blankets will help us to keep our families warm”.

* Names have been changed to protect individual identities.

Overcoming adversity: displaced people take the first steps home (continuation)

Now, Saw Da Wei earns a living by cutting bamboo and cultivating some land around the village. He has also been appointed as administrator by the government administration department. Even with this job, the current situation is not yet ideal for the family; nevertheless they are hopeful that more people will join them in this challenging time as they work to re-establish their lives back home.

“We would like to see more people returning back to this village but since the opportunities for livelihoods are not many, development should take place first before more people will be ready to return back to this community” points out Saw Da Wei, before adding: “We would like to see young and educated people with their families move back here, and a school to be built”.



“The best part of my job is when I find a child who is happy, well and thriving with his or her new family”

Poyu

Yuthayaporn Aekpromsri (nickname Poyu) has worked as a BID Assistant with UNHCR for the past five years. Her work involves spending two or three days a week in the camps interviewing children (like the girl mentioned above), their caregivers, family members, teachers and community leaders.

“The hardest part is sometimes I have to work with a child who has experienced terrible neglect or abuse. I have to be very careful to talk with the child in a way that does not re-traumatize him or her. However, as I am also Karen and familiar with their culture, this makes it a bit easier” Poyu says.

Sakda Thankornsakul, who works with Poyu, says without hesitation, “my favourite part is talking to the children. I really love working with children and hearing their views and feelings about their situation.” They say “it’s good to talk” and this applies to children just as much as it does to adults when all they may want, or need at that time, is for someone to listen to them.

In 2013, UNHCR BID staff conducted 565 detailed Best Interest Determinations for children across the nine camps. Each BID is approved by a panel composed of child protection specialists, from both UNHCR and partner organizations, who are familiar with the refugee camps. For more information on the BID process, please see the UNHCR Field Handbook for the BID process: <http://www.unhcr.org/50f6d27f9.html>

BID in action ... !

The Best Interest Determination (BID) process is a key element of UNHCR’s protection strategy and activities for children in the refugee camps, particularly those who are living with a caregiver who is not their biological parent.

After years of conflict and displacement, there are over 4,500 children living in the refugee camps who are not with their biological parents. In individual cases where protection concerns are identified, a UNHCR BID staff member will carry out interviews with the child, his or her caregivers, and any other important people in the child’s life. This helps in documenting, assessing and affirming the best care options and arrangements for a particular child.

“I’ve lived with my auntie since I was seven years old, and I want to resettle with her to Canada”, a 15 year old girl in Mae La Oon camp told UNHCR BID Assistant Sakda Thankornsakul. Her mother passed away in Myanmar and her father succumbed to malaria shortly after arriving with her in the camp. The girl herself was also sick with malaria, but recovered and continued to live in the camp in the care of her aunt.



BID in action: Yuthayaporn Aekpromsri (Poyu) and Sakda Thankornsakul



Monitoring refugee returns

Mornings for UNHCR staff in the field begin when the first movements stir in the village, typically shortly after the roosters announce their presence to the world. On this morning in a small village east of Dawei, the capital city in Tanintharyi Region, the first among us gets up around 6:00AM with the sun already on the rise. A good night's sleep on the wooden floor was offered to us by a village elder (as is custom when outsiders spend the night) made us ready for the day's work ahead.

After packing up our sleeping mats and mosquito nets, waking up to a bucket shower of cold water from the village's dug well, and thanking the elder for his kind accommodation, the five of us – three UNHCR field staff, a government official and our driver— climb back into our aging Toyota Land Cruiser. Known colloquially as a "Hard-Top", the vehicle is equipped with special utilities such as a winch to ensure that field visits can take place even in the difficult terrain.

UNHCR has been carrying out return assessment missions throughout South-East Myanmar since June 2013

Our purpose is to visit a remote village called Mar Ho Ssa*, located near the border with Thailand, where a local partner has informed us that a small number of refugees have recently returned home. These field missions are an important part of UNHCR's work in south-east Myanmar, where political progress has opened up the prospect of eventual return for refugees and others displaced by decades of conflict and instability. Monitoring the situation of those who have already taken the decision to return enables us to check that returns are genuinely voluntary, and

that they are not facing any protection risks. Importantly it also helps us to know what kind of support is needed to help them re-start their lives after years – and sometimes decades – in exile.

While the agency conducts returnee monitoring in many countries across the world, each context presents its own difficulties and requires practical adaptations. In south-east Myanmar, staff face the challenge of entering remote communities which may never before have been visited by an international organization. Although UNHCR has

worked in parts of the region since 2003, the more complex return monitoring exercise, launched in June of last year, requires field staff to travel deeper into hitherto conflict-affected areas. Accessing communities is one of the greatest challenges, even where security is no longer an issue. Further north in Kayah State, return assessments often require at least a half-day hike through the mountains, while even the most reliable vehicle is useless in parts of Mon and Kayin States where villages can only be accessed by boat. Most locations in Tanintharyi can be reached by car, although overnight stays such as ours are almost always necessary.

Most return assessments follow a similar sequence of events, starting with a courtesy call upon arrival to the village leader. Few villages in the south-east have mobile coverage, or any other form of telecommunications connection, and thus UNHCR field teams often cannot notify the community of their arrival in advance. The meeting with the village leader is therefore both customary and pragmatic, as it would not be possible to assemble villagers for a discussion without their help.

*The name of the village has been changed to protect the confidentiality of its inhabitants.



Monitoring refugee returns

(continuation)

Today, we are somewhat unlucky as the village leader in Mar Ho Ssa has been in Dawei town for the last couple of days, although his deputy kindly offers to do his best to assist.

As these rural villages are often spread out over vast agricultural lands, it can take hours to contact and locate the villagers for a meeting. We climb back into our vehicle and drive a kilometer through the bush to a clearing where a few dozen houses are scattered and the community meeting will be held.

Return assessments generally take the form of community level discussions, rather than interviews with individual returnees. Those who have returned so far typically prefer to keep a low-profile, particularly if they have not yet taken a firm decision as to whether to remain back home permanently. Fortunately today's community meeting draws several dozen participants, including many assertive women and impressively patient children, some of whom appear more intrigued by the foreign face of one of the UNHCR team than the substance of the discussion itself.

The community leaders confirm that refugees from their village still remain in Thailand, and explain that a few have visited recently, but nobody has yet made the decision to return permanently. UNHCR staff accordingly record Mar Ho Ssa as a refugee "village of origin" but not as a verified "return village," the latter denoting communities to which refugees have already returned.



environment, demonstrating the need for careful trust-building.

Field staff face the challenge of entering remote communities which may never before have been visited by an international organisation

Most of the questions asked by UNHCR in fact focus not on the return of refugees and IDPs, but rather the

After the assessment portion of the visit is over, the deputy village leader invites the guests to a tour of Mar Ho Ssa village, including walking to the doorstep of the majestic pagoda that overlooks the settlement. Despite the challenges facing them, there is a tangible sense of community within the village, underpinned by the self-sufficient coping mechanisms that have developed here over time.

conditions in this potential return community as a whole. The Mar Ho Ssa group is relatively comfortable with the discussion, and is forthcoming in outlining the main issues facing their community, such as access to services and livelihood opportunities. In visits to communities elsewhere, staff have sometime struggled to immediately establish the appropriate interview

Before leaving, we are invited for a late lunch at an elder's house, grateful for the generous offering of curry, rice and ngapi, a paste made of fermented seafood used here as a condiment, we share our own food provisions as a contribution to the meal. As the sun begins its descent, our group makes its way back to our Hard-Top and we begin our return trip to town before sundown.

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Refugee survey in Mae Hong Son province

A refugee profiling survey commissioned by UNHCR is currently taking place in the nine refugee camps along the Thai border with Myanmar. The survey is being carried out by the Mae Fah Luang Foundation (under Royal Patronage). Refugees in Ban Mae Nai Soi and Ban Mae Surin camps eagerly participated during the month of March. First launched in other camps in 2013, the month-long exercise in these two camps in Mae Hong Son Province sought to assess the socio-demographic profile of the refugees and understand how they see their futures beyond life in a refugee camp.



A volunteer conducting the survey in Ban Mae Nai Soi and Ban Mae Surin camps



Listening to the concerns of the camps' residents

To avoid confusion or unrealistic expectations, UNHCR and the MFL Foundation spent much time to inform the camp residents of the purpose and the value of the survey, which is entirely voluntary. Through a series of question and answer sessions, and focus group discussions, the community became aware that the questions were primarily aimed at understanding the profile of the refugee community, including social, cultural and ethnic demographics, health issues, specific vulnerabilities, education and qualifications, livelihood skill-sets, and their sentiments and hopes for the future.

Fully consultative and participatory in process, the refugee community is involved in every step along the way. Indeed, with the situation in Myanmar changing rapidly, the refugees were happy to be closely involved in an exercise aimed at helping them prepare for the future, whatever that might be. The survey will be critical in helping concerned actors such as government, donors, NGOs, CBOs, UN agencies and community leadership to “hear the voices” of the refugee community and identify their concerns and their priorities.

The findings will be used to help influence the humanitarian and development planning process in Myanmar and elsewhere. Survey results in other camps have highlighted a plethora of issues that need to be addressed ranging from development of livelihood skills and community-coping mechanisms to improvement of education and health infrastructures, access to land and protecting property rights in Myanmar.

A Karenni translation of the questionnaire was prepared and reviewed by the Karenni Refugee Committee (KnRC) and the camp committee. After being trained by MFLF on the purpose of the survey and then how to collect data from the survey respondents, more than 60 volunteers from among the refugee community assisted MFLF during the exercise.

Such surveys can only succeed with the full understanding and support of the camps' residents. UNHCR has appreciated the strong collaboration with the refugee community, MFLF, and the Royal Thai Government. Community leaders in both camps took a very active role in the survey and with their help the vast majority of the residents in Ban Mae Nai Soi and Ban Mae Surin were happy to participate.



As part of the survey each refugee was asked to draw what would his ideal life look like. A good occasion to discover some hidden talents.



Cambodia Dreams: refugees reflect on experiences of return



Starting in February 2014, UNHCR has been offering screening of the movie Cambodia Dream in the nine camps along the Thai-Myanmar border

“I think it's timeless and universal. It could be anywhere in the world. What is it about? It is about belonging. It's largely about tenacity, the resilience of humanity to overcome, to hold fast to a dream, not lose sight of it and achieve it. It's a really beautiful, pure, wonderful story about generosity, humanity, love, forgiveness, reconciliation. There is not one word of politics in that film. No one is right and no one is wrong.”

(Stanley Harper to UNHCR on 17 September 2009)

The story of Cambodia Dreams started in 1986, when the BBC commissioned Stanley Harper, a New Zealander, to make a film on the Cambodian refugees living on the Thai border. For more than a decade, Cambodia had been the theatre of intense persecution and a destructive civil war, tearing apart the nation and causing thousands of people to flee. Now, his film about the experiences of loss, exile and return of Cambodian refugees is the subject of a series of showings in refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border.

The movie is a universal tale. It tells the story of all of those who have been separated by war and civil unrest. It puts into words the deep and divisive feelings of those who had to leave their homeland and those who stayed behind. It embodies the moral values and ethics that give strength to a community in times of upheaval. It records the fears and the concerns of refugees who, all across the world, refuse to resign themselves to life in the camps. More than enough to captivate the public and bring about lively debates and great discussions!

The initial project was supposed to last until 1992, but the filmmaker decided to go deeper. Mr. Harper spent the next two decades chronicling the parallel lives of a family, half of which fled to a refugee camp in Thailand while the other half remained in their village in Cambodia.

The hero of the movie, Yan Chheing, is truly inspirational. Despite remaining in a refugee camp for 12 long years, this former rice farmer always refused to consider herself a victim. She knows the problems that face all people separated from their roots. She has a good memory of what Cambodia was in times of peace and prosperity. Her grandchildren have all been born in refugee camps and know nothing of their homeland. They grew up without ever seeing a field or a forest, eating rationed rice and drinking water delivered by truck, but nonetheless she makes great efforts to maintain their cultural identity. She never gives up the hope of going back to her old village to pass on her skills to the future generations, and she is finally rewarded.

Unlike most documentaries that paint a grim picture of the aftermath of a civil war, Cambodia Dreams tells an uplifting story of reunification and reconciliation which goes beyond the actual history of the family Mr. Harper followed. Not surprisingly, the residents of Ban Mae Nai Soi and Ban Mae Surin welcomed the movie as reflective of their own experience.

In the month of March 2014 alone, close to a thousand people enjoyed the movie in Ban Mae Nai Soi and Ban Mae Surin, confirming that the initiative to offer these screenings has been a great success. In Ban Mae Surin, we observed individuals peeping through the window of the Camp Hall in which the screening was held, having been unable to find somewhere to sit inside.



On screen, Yan Chheing, during a movie session in Ban Mae Nai Soi camp



Screening with groups of elderly refugees in collaboration with COERR at Ban Mae Nai Soi camp

Cambodia Dreams: refugees reflect on experiences of return (continuation)

To ensure every part of the community could enjoy the film, students from KnCC school in Ban Mae Nai Soi volunteered to help UNHCR and COERR with the organization of two special screenings for older people who were unable to read the Burmese subtitles. These remarkable young people showed enthusiasm, patience, persistence and occasionally a good sense of humor, to the pleasure and appreciation of their elders.

Bringing together people of different age groups is always mutually beneficial. For the youth, it strengthened their sense of community and social responsibility, while for the elders, it gives them a chance to share their life experiences and perspectives on the past and the future of the community. Cooperation, interaction and exchanges between the youth and the older generation are key since the former are our future and the latter the means to understand the past.

Young and old alike, most received the film with natural empathy and some with mixed emotions. A lot of laughter and but also many tears. However, one thing was certain; no one remained untouched by this compelling human story!



Karen refugee leaders visit Kayin and Mon States

On 3 March, the UNHCR office in Mawlamyine hosted an informal meeting with a group of Karen refugee leaders. The 18-person team was headed by Saw Robert Htwe, Chairperson of the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), and included committee members and other representatives from the refugee camps in Thailand, who had crossed over for a visit to Myanmar to better understand the current situation.

The discussions touched on the fact that refugees did not yet feel ready to return home to Myanmar, and that there was still a lack of confidence in the peace process. Many refugees expressed that it will be important to first see how the return of internally displaced people goes, before themselves considering return. A recent reduction in the monthly food rations has added to the refugees existing anxiety, and some feel that they have little choice but to seek work outside the camps.

In the informal discussions it was noted that access to land and the availability of livelihood opportunities would be crucial to support the refugees return in the future. There would also be a need for initial food assistance for the most vulnerable to help them reintegrate back home; access to health services, schools and other social services. The visiting delegation emphasized that it remains critical that the refugees are kept informed about developments in the peace process, and about the community support plans of the Government and other agencies.

Earlier that day, the same group of refugees, along with other representatives from the mainly Karen camps, had an informal meeting with the Chief Minister and members of the State Government in Hpa-An, Kayin State.

The purpose of this second informal KRC meeting with the State Government was not to reach any agreement on refugee returns

but rather to foster the important relationships and favorable environments as they work towards supporting the voluntary repatriation of any refugees that may decide, in the future, to return home.



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UNHCR Field Office Hpa-An officially opens

After more than a decade working in the south-east, throughout which time hundreds of field missions were carried out in Kayin State, UNHCR officially opened an office in Hpa-An, the state capital, on 27 February 2014, after a “soft opening” two years before.

The office becomes UNHCR’s fifth in the South-East, the latest addition to an expanding operation which is now focused on preparation for return.

The opening ceremony, a short but formal event held late in the morning, was extremely well attended by dozens of humanitarian and development organizations working in Kayin State, and several distinguished delegates. In addition to Senior Union and State level government representatives the event was marked by a visit from the UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner for Operations, Ms. Janet Lim and other senior UNHCR staff from Geneva, Bangkok and Yangon.

and wellbeing we are mandated to serve.” By establishing a permanent presence in Kayin State, UNHCR will deepen its engagement considerably and expand its team to include both national and international staff.

Recounting her experience the week before in Mae La camp in Thailand, Ms. Lim explained that the refugees she met were encouraged by developments in Myanmar, but emphasized that it would take time to build trust in the peace process, and for them to feel confident that there is indeed a secure and stable future for them and their children back home.

Ms. Lim explained why opening the office in Hpa-An, which will also serve as UNHCR’s new hub for all of south-east Myanmar, is crucial. “Kayin State is likely to be a particularly critical focus of our operations, as it represents the area of origin of some two-thirds of the refugees in Thailand”.

Ms. Lim traveled to Hpa-An as part of the final leg of a two-week tour of Thailand and Myanmar. Her mission included a visit the week before to the Temporary Shelters in western Thailand, including the camps where refugees from Kayin State are living.

In her speech to the audience at the ceremony, Ms. Lim asserted that the opening of the office in Hpa-An, “marks an important moment in our collaboration with the Government of Myanmar, and the refugees and displaced communities whose interests



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Janet Lim delivering her speech during the official opening of Hpa-An office