

THAILAND – MYANMAR CROSS-BORDER BULLETIN

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Olympic Spirit 'Alive and Kicking'

Over 13,000 students in displacement-affected areas to benefit from sports kits donated by the International Olympic Committee through UNHCR.

The universality of sport is evident in this remote corner of South-East Asia. Scenes of children running after a ball in Ah Lu Lay, a small village near Mawlamyine in Mon state, mirror playing fields as far away as America, Africa and Europe.

But this is no ordinary place. Years of civil conflict have ravaged this part of Myanmar, displacing an estimated 230,000 people in the areas where UNHCR is operating, and driving some 120,000 others into camps along Thailand's border with the country.

Myanmar is fresh from the euphoria of hosting the South-East Asian (SEA) Games in December after a hiatus of 44 years. The Games brought teams from neighbouring countries to compete with each other in disciplines such as football, weightlifting and judo, as well as regionally popular sports like chinlone and sepak that involve kicking a rattan ball.

The sporting spirit is evident in Ah Lu Lay, where local youth recently received sports equipment donated by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) through UNHCR. This is where the joint project "Giving is Winning" was launched in Myanmar on Thursday 9 January,

paving the way for donations to 20 schools covering 13,000 students in Kayah, Kayin and Mon states, as well as the Tanintharyi region.

Among the guests present at the hand-over ceremonies last week were Sports Ministry officials also representing the Myanmar National Olympic Committee, representatives from the Ministry for the Progress of Border Areas and National Races and Development Affairs (NaTaLa), local dignitaries and authorities, and the headmasters of all the beneficiary schools. Two Myanmar gold medalists from the SEA Games were also present to share their passion for sport and to encourage the youth.



Distribution of Sport's equipment by the International Olympic Committee and UNHCR.

Ah Lu Lay high school, Mon State, January 2014





"We are so proud to have been selected as one of the [Giving is Winning] recipient schools. The sports equipment is greatly appreciated by the students and will help develop more interest in sport in the school."

U Win Thein, the headmaster of the Ah Lu Lay school

This donation is the latest under the "Giving is Winning" programme managed by UNHCR and IOC since 2004. Athletes and Olympic Games participants donate sports equipment and clothing that are distributed by UNHCR to refugees, displaced and affected communities. A global campaign, it aims to foster values such as respect, fairness and inclusiveness through sports, benefiting communities affected by displacement, including host communities.

The sports kits contain all sorts of equipment, including table tennis bats, volleyballs and footballs. They sometimes introduce new games to the youngsters. When asked what they think the kits might contain, a young student replies with a big hopeful smile: "Footballs!"



'Cooking up a Storm' in Mae Ra Ma Luang



"I do not want to be just a house wife and a mother who knows how to cook only a few dishes" says Naw Ser Nay Moo, a refugee in Mae Ra Ma Luang camp who is enrolled in a cooking course provided by ADRA and partly funded by UNHCR. Students learn how to make a variety of food and snacks, with an orientation towards food that can be prepared and sold for an income.

Several graduates of the course have gone on to start their own restaurants or shops inside the camp and have been able to supplement the income of their families.

One of the restaurants is particularly successful and humanitarian colleagues often stop by to have lunch, a cup of tea or one of their delicious snacks such as donuts soaked in palm sugar.

One participant in the cooking class recently told UNHCR that he hopes to be able to use his cooking skills when he departs for resettlement. He is hoping that these skills will give him an opportunity to work in the catering or hospitality industry in the United States.

Naw Ser Nay Moo also said that with the dishes she learned to cook in the class she could now prepare special food for her family such as birthday cakes or other festive occasion food. This saves her money because she doesn't have to buy them from elsewhere when

her family celebrates a special occasion.

The classes also provide an opportunity for making new friends. For some participants, especially those who may have missed the opportunity to complete their school education, the classes are a simple reminder that everyone has potential and everyone can learn a new skill.

"I do not want to be just a house wife and a mother who knows how to cook only a few dishes"



Fires Rage in Refugee Camps

An elderly refugee from Myanmar has died and several others are injured after fire broke out in two of the refugee camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border.

The first incident occurred on Friday afternoon, 27 December, in Mae La camp in Tak province, western Thailand. One refugee was very badly burnt. Some 130 homes were destroyed in the country's largest refugee camp, home to some 45,000 refugees from Myanmar.

The fire also burnt down a school and boarding house in Mae La camp. Fortunately there were no casualties as it was a school holiday. Eleven unaccompanied and separated children who lived in the boarding house are now staying at a nearby house.

The second fire started on Saturday afternoon, 28 December, in Ban Mai Nai Soi camp in Mae Hong Son province, northern Thailand. A 76-year-old woman was killed as she was trapped in her home. A young man who was slightly injured was given first aid treatment. Some 35 homes and community structures were damaged.

Responses and rehabilitation after the fires

In Mae La camp, UNHCR provided 200 plastic sheets, blankets and mats that were distributed to the impacted refugees. Other emergency responses included the IOM transport of blankets provided by the Karen Refugee Committee. The Royal Thai Government District Office provided water, cooked meals and other assistance to the affected refugees.

The causes of both fires are unknown and are being investigated by authorities.

These fires are not the first to affect Thailand's refugee camps. In March 2013, a massive blaze in Ban Mae Surin camp of Mae Hong Son province killed 37 refugees and left more than 2,000 others homeless; and in February 2012, a huge fire in Umpiem camp destroyed the homes of 2,800 refugees.



In Ban Mai Nai Soi camp, UNHCR, Government authorities and aid agencies distributed plastic sheets, blankets, pillows, mosquito nets, clothing, cooking utensils, stoves and food to survivors who are now living with friends and relatives in the camp. The camp committee is coordinating all assistance activities.

While the material assistance provided an immediate comfort to those that lost their homes, it will take much longer to ease the psychological pain that the fires have had on the victims and the emotional impact on the refugee communities at-large. Meanwhile, UNHCR remains highly concerned that such devastating fires will continue to ravage the camps, especially during the dry season. While fire prevention strategies are being enhanced, the challenge is further compounded by the congestion of the camps, the surrounding dense forests and the traditional material used for the construction of refugee shelters (bamboo and leaf-thatched roofing).



Student School Debates

To celebrate the anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child signed on 20 November 1989, COERR, a UNHCR partner, conducted a series of events to promote child welfare. Among these activities, an inter-school debate was organized between senior students from Ban Mai Nai Soi and Ban Mae Surin.

The topic: "Is Return Home Better than Living in the Refugee Camps?"

The event was attended by over 200 students gathered together on Friday 15 November at KNCC School in Ban Mai Nai Soi and KNSFP School in Ban Mae Surin on Thursday 21, November. In Ban Mai Nai Soi, the debate competition was arranged for students between two schools while two teams from the same school competing in Ban Mae

Surin camp. Before the debate was opened, COERR and UNHCR gave introductory remark stressing the importance of enabling children to voice their concerns and share their vision of their communities' future. UNHCR encouraged the children in the audience to consider what would fulfill them as individuals and to ask themselves, "how can I work towards this goal."

A lively and well-informed debate followed between the student teams in front of a jury panel composed of representatives from KnED, KnCC, COERR and UNHCR. Each speaker raised very different perspectives and concerns; the discussion went on to cover a wide range of topics such as education, economic and social development, health, safety, and the political changes taking place in Myanmar. The students

also debated on their life in the camp, discussing on the one hand the importance of the support received in Thailand but insisting on the other hand on the need to develop skills in order to be self-reliant and contribute to the well-being of their community.

Lots of valid points were raised on each side so much that in Ban Mai Nai Soi the team from KnCC School advocating for return to homeland won when on the contrary the team defending life in the camp was declared winner in Ban Mae Surin. Regardless of the results, all the participants were praised and rewarded for the quality of their contributions and for an excellent event, that was exceptionally interesting and useful for everyone who attended.



"If there is no school in my village, I want to go and teach there!"

"Maybe life will be harder there. Maybe we will have less help. But at least we will be free on our land. It is always safer in a cage but it is not real life. I am still young and I refuse to spend my life here!"

"I want to go back, even if it means I will have to make sacrifices."

"Of course the situation is not perfect on the other side. But everything is changing now. We are the new generation. We received a good education here but now our country needs us...."

International Day of Persons with Disabilities

Story and photos by:



Within the framework of its Myanmar Border Project, Handicap International, together with three Self Help Groups of people with disability celebrated, on the third of December 2013, the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (IDPD) in five out of the nine temporary shelters hosting Myanmar refugees along the Thai Myanmar border. The theme was the UN chosen one, "Break barriers, open doors: for an inclusive society for all".

Many activities such as dancing, singing, games playing were organized. The whole community, including people with disabilities, attended them. The "accessibility park" which was aimed at simulating the community on the barriers in the environment that people with disabilities face.

Mr. Aung Way, a person with physical impairment who is the member of the Mae La camp Self Help Group said: "I was wondering why to celebrate or commemorate this date if disability is not an issue for the majority of people in the camps? But for me, the day is not about celebrating disability, but instead, about celebrating all that is possible for people with disabilities, their abilities, and all that they are capable of". One father of a child with a disability said that from the event he now knows about the rights of people with a disability and he has seen many people with disabilities demonstrating various talents, so "that is why we will go on celebrating the International Day of persons with disabilities".

The IDPWD was organized thanks to the support of the Camp Commanders, the refugee community, NGOs, CBOs, and UNHCR, and the financial support of the US Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.



" But for me, the day is not about celebrating disability, but instead, about celebrating all that is possible for people with disabilities, their abilities, and all that they are capable of..."



Celebrations and traditional performances





Interview

Mr Ei Reh, 65 years old, has dedicated his life to his community. Serving as member and Chairperson of Ban Mai Nai Soi Camp Committee since 1991. He has fought all his life to keep the history and the identity of his people alive in spite of the prolonged exile. He is now retiring to let a new generation take on the mission.

Mr Ei Reh, thank you for having us. Could you briefly introduce yourself for our readers?

My name is Ku Ei Reh. It is a Karenni name that I have inherited from my ancestors. It has passed among the men of my family generation after generation. I was born in 1948 in the village of Daw Pa Pha, near Loikaw in what is now Kayah State.

At a very young age, I was sent to a Catholic boarding school near my village. I lived there until the age of 10 when I went back to my village in 1958. I kept on studying for two more years and eventually had to leave school in 1960 to help my parents in the fields.

In 1974, at the age of 26, I left my home to look for a better job and arrived in a place called Tenakweh in Shadaw Township, where I met the one who would become my wife. We got married soon after and I settled there. We have four children; two sons and two daughters. Three of them were resettled to the United States and one son lives here in Ban Mai Nai Soi with me.

Last year, you returned to Myanmar for the first time since you left. It must have brought some memories. Could you describe your life in Myanmar back then?

In early 1986, the Myanmar government of the time launched a “four cuts campaign” in Kayah State. Burma Army patrols and columns approached the area I was living in which caused a vast displacement. I was head of my village at the time and I decided to take my people away from the danger. On April 5, 1986, the whole village fled across the mountains. After walking for two days we reached the Thai border near the village of Nai Soi.

We approached the local Thai police officer and he let us settle near the village. Then, with new refugees coming in 1993 and 1996, we had to move to accommodate them. Eventually, Ban Mae Nai Soi Temporary Shelter (refugee camp) was set up in 2002 and we still live here today.

"What I wish for is that the new generation leaders will manage to keep the community united. I hope they will be able to bring us back home, to Myanmar, and keep the same spirit and the same value we have transmitted to them. Education is the key. They need to keep learning, keep working hard and with everyone's help, UNHCR and all the partners, I am hopeful that we will finally have a brighter future."

What has been your main concern when arriving in Thailand?

My main concern was the children. How would we educate them? We had nothing at first. After settling in the first shelters, we started a school but we could not teach beyond Grade 4 (early middle school). Thanks to all the people who help us here, today we can teach our children all the way to Post-10 and give them a decent education. This was my biggest fear when I arrived here. How to make sure my children would be able to read, write, count and just have a normal life.

When did you start serving your community and why? And what was the biggest challenge you had to face as part of the camp committee?

I arrived from Myanmar as head of my village, therefore I was quickly involved in leading the community. I did not have a particular ambition. Being a village head in Myanmar at the time was quite dangerous. If anything went wrong with the authorities, you were the one to answer for it, no matter what your responsibility was. I just thought someone had to do this job and it felt like I was the only one willing to do it.

In Myanmar, in the village we all knew one another; everyone had the same religion and shared the same values. Once we arrived in Thailand, the big challenge was to keep the community together, to maintain the identity alive. We had to mix with people speaking different dialect, with different beliefs. This made things really hard for the parents and for the leaders to preserve the tradition in the community.

What are your plans now? Are you really going to retire entirely?

Oh, I am getting old! It's time to hand over to the next generation. We have a lot of younger people, with a lot of

energy and fresh ideas. There is a lot left to do for them. My generation has preserved the memory of our people. We passed on the traditions. Now they have to [keep the traditions alive] and build a real future for themselves and the community. Of course, I will always be around to help them if they need me. But, I have been serving since 1991. I want to get some rest!

What is your hope for your people in the future?

What I wish for is that the new generation leaders will manage to keep the community united. I hope they will be able to bring us back home, to Myanmar, and keep the same spirit and the same value we have transmitted to them. Education is the key. They need to keep learning, keep working hard and with everyone's help, UNHCR and all the partners, I am hopeful that we will finally have a brighter future.

**Interviewed by UNHCR Field Office
Mae Hong Son**

Durable Solutions Training in South-East Myanmar

A Letter of Understanding agreed between UNHCR and the Government of Myanmar signed in June 2013 commits the Office to help develop the capacity not only of government officials but also non-state actors to respond to returning refugees and IDPs. As part of that commitment, a UNHCR team led by Simon Russell, UNHCR's Senior Protection Coordinator in Yangon, held workshops in Loikaw, Dawei, Hpa-an and Mawlyamyine during November and December on durable solutions for IDPs and refugees.

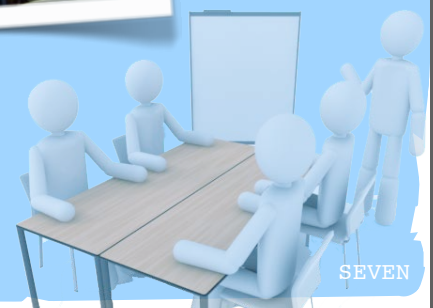
The workshops covered the definition of IDPs and refugees, the standards to be applied during displacement and the standards to be applied in the search for durable solutions. The workshops also covered humanitarian action, including key concepts like neutrality and independence.

Attendance at the workshops was by heads of department from state governments, such as NaTaLa, Relief and Rural Development, Immigration, State Planning, Social Welfare, Health and Education. From non-state actors, the New Mon State Party and Karen National Union sent representatives. In all, well over 100 officials and non-state actors participated.

Key issues which came up during the workshops included questions about the link between the peace process and refugee return, the understanding of humanitarian principles and the tension between managing a return process and respecting freedom of choice. Participants expressed interest in knowing more about the experience of other countries and asked that further workshops be held at the township level on a more detailed, planning basis.



Group Discussion in Durable Solution workshop for the staff from agencies in Kayin State (12 December)



16 Days of Activism launched in Thanbyuzayat Town, Mon State

Mon Women's Organization, Marie Stopes International and UNHCR collaborate to stage an event for the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

Since being designated by the United Nations General Assembly in 1999 as International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, November 25th has served as the starting point for the 16 Days of Activism campaign leading up to Human Rights Day on December 10th each year.

Events were organized throughout South-East Myanmar for this year's campaign, including a special event in Thanbyuzayat Town in Mon State, organized by the Mon Women's Organization (MWO) and UNHCR's partner, Marie Stopes International (MSI).

MSI launched in July 2013 a UNHCR-funded project which aims to strengthen community-based prevention and response mechanisms to address sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in Mon and Kayin States.

In all, around 150 people gathered for the event in Thanbyuzayat, including the township administrator and medical officer, as well as UNHCR's field team for Mon State.

The Chairman of the Shin Saw Pu's Woman Entrepreneur's Association led the proceedings with a keynote address emphasizing the importance of the activism campaign, while a local boy gave a speech explaining the meaning of the white ribbon, which has served as a symbol for the international movement since the 1980s.

The event was closed with a candlelight vigil to commemorate the women who have been victims of violence around the world.



The participants lighted up candles to commemorate the women who have been victims of violence around the world.



Regular Consultations with the Royal Thai Government Authorities

❖ **Royal Thai Army 1st Army, 9th Division - UNHCR meeting** on 12 November in Kanchanaburi discussed the current situation along the Thai-Myanmar border, jointly considered the likely scenarios and discussed the existing and emerging durable solutions available to the refugees living in the nine Temporary Shelters.

❖ **Registration Workshop** in November in Pattaya, Chonburi Province. UNHCR and MOI - Operations Center for Displaced Persons (OCDP), Bureau of Registration Administration (BORA) discussed the criteria for Fast-Track PAB, followed by Refresher FTPAB Workshops during November and December for PAB Board members in four Provinces.

❖ **Royal Thai Army - UNHCR Training Seminar** in Chiang Mai on 22 November. UNHCR and the RTA Displaced Persons Coordination Unit (NSC project), took stock of the current situation and the evolving scenarios in south-east Myanmar. The discussion included an update on UNHCR's programs on the border and a presentation from the NSC on its long-standing support to voluntary repatriation.

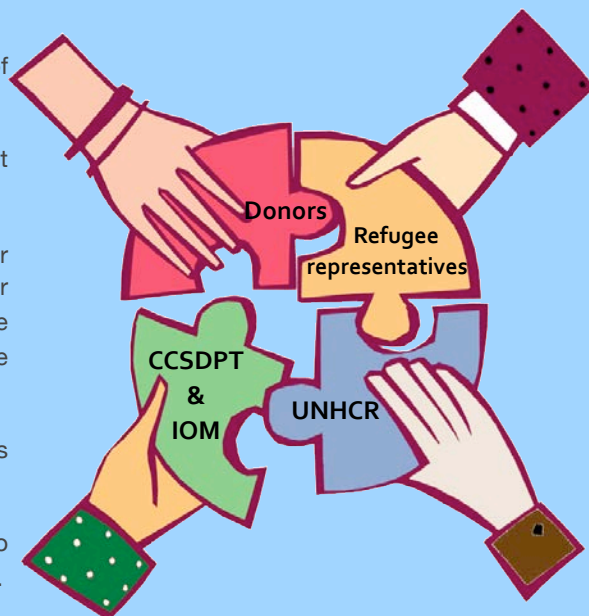
❖ **Royal Thai Government - UNHCR Annual Retreat** between 12 and 13 December in Hua Hin, Thailand to review the achievement and challenges in protecting refugees. Issues included statelessness, refugee registration, resettlement (and the 'Fast-Track' PAB), SGBV, access to justice, Child Protection, livelihoods, the refugee survey, information management, and preparedness for voluntary repatriation.



Voluntary Repatriation Coordination Group (VCG)

The VCG is a new component of the humanitarian Voluntary Repatriation (VolRep) coordination mechanism in Thailand led by UNHCR. It seeks to ensure a harmonized approach to addressing the strategic and policy related issues concerning the preparedness for an eventual conduct of refugee voluntary returns to Myanmar. The VCG was established after consultations with key actors and stakeholders. On 29 November 2013 the VCG met for the first time. It is not a decision-making body and its agenda will be inclusive and transparent. The VCG members will look to:

- Assert and uphold the international standards and principles of voluntary repatriation.
- Discuss and advise on policy and strategic issues, but not engage in detailed operational matters.
- Identify issues that require more in-depth assessment (and/or brainstorming) within the group, or as appropriate, in other relevant forums; keeping the “bigger picture” lens in analyzing the issues and aspects that need to be taken into account while preparing for future refugee returns.
- Forge common understanding and consistent approaches among the participants and their constituencies.
- Formulate common advocacy messages with regard to voluntary refugee return to Myanmar, and other durable solutions.



A number of issues for discussions in the VCG have already been identified, including; criteria and possible assistance for spontaneous returns, types of contents for organized voluntary repatriation agreements, appropriate timing for drafting of a voluntary repatriation plan, etc.

Information Management Unit Thailand Operation

UNHCR Field Office Mae Sot
34/5 Mae Sot-Mae Tao Rd.,
Mae Sot District, Tak
63110 THAILAND

Contact: illangas@unhcr.org
suksathi@unhcr.org

UNHCR Thailand

3rd Fl., United Nations Building
Rajadamnern Nok Ave.,
Bangkok 10200 THAILAND

UNHCR Myanmar

UNHCR Field Office at Mawlamyine
No. 138 Baho Road, Pabedan Quarter
Mawlamyine

Contact: keogh@unhcr.org