

February 2008

Dear Friend of IRT

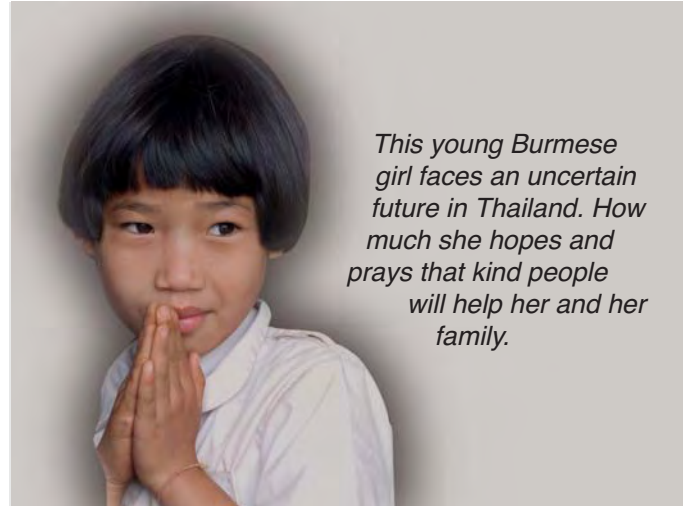
How can anyone forget the shameful scenes shown on our television screens late last year when the Burmese military cracked down without mercy on peaceful demonstrations across the country? Thousands of monks and citizens were beaten and arrested, many of whom are still suffering in prison. Those who were not arrested fled and made the long and dangerous journey to Thailand to seek refuge.

Of course this is not the first time the brutal regime in Burma has committed gross human rights' abuses. For decades they have systematically raped, tortured and killed people from ethnic minority groups such as the Shan, Karen, Karenni and Mon, their ultimate motive being to wipe them from the face of the earth. While this goes on, the democratically elected leader of Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi, remains under house arrest, her home literally crumbling around her.

Journalists have turned their attention away from Burma and, as a consequence, the demonstrations and subsequent crackdown appear to have been forgotten by the rest of the world. We should never close our eyes to the abuse of human rights,



Fleeing for their lives across the fast flowing and perilous Moei River. A dangerous journey, driven by desperation to escape oppression.



This young Burmese girl faces an uncertain future in Thailand. How much she hopes and prays that kind people will help her and her family.

wherever it may happen. Through our website and newsletter we will continue to keep our supporters informed of the situation in Burma, and our work to help those on the Thai-Burma border who are refugees from the violence.

IRT has for the past nine years supported a number of projects on the Thai – Burma border to help those who have fled persecution and torture in their homeland. Now more than ever IRT needs to increase its support to these projects.

I was able to travel to the Thai – Burma border late last year to see for myself the situation affecting tens of thousands of Burmese. I visited the projects we are supporting and was able to investigate what further help IRT could provide.

IRT is continuing to fund two programmes in Thailand, the Mae Sot refugee programme and Outreach to the Shan. Nearly all our work there takes place outside the main refugee camps. Amazingly there are many aid organisations implementing projects in the camps and the needs of the refugees there are well looked after. However, outside the camps, where the suffering is greatest, there is virtually no help other than that which we are funding.

It is vital that IRT strengthens its support for these two programmes, because without us thousands of people, particularly children, will have no help and no one else to turn to.

Mae Sot Programme

Mae Sot is the border town where most Burmese refugees enter Thailand. The Moei river separates Burma and Thailand here and the refugees cross the river on inflated lorry inner tubes. I was taken secretly to a remote part of the river and I witnessed for myself two families being ferried across. The river flows deep and fast here and I photographed the terrified Burmese making this dangerous crossing. Every week there are accidents and several refugees, often vulnerable children, perish in the river. Yet they keep coming, desperate to flee the brutal beatings, torture and killing.

For the past two years the Thai government has not granted refugee status to these Burmese entering Thailand. The government fears that if they do they will be inundated with hundreds of thousands of Burmese creating a massive strain on the Thai economy and its public services. Therefore these Burmese who enter Thailand now have no status at all, they cannot get jobs or access to health care and every day run the risk of arrest and deportation. I can understand the predicament the Thai government finds itself in, but ultimately it is the Burmese who suffer, and desperately need our help.



Around 300 refugees a day are deported back to Burma. This is the crammed Immigration Detention Centre in Mae Sot where it is hot, the wait is long and the people are frightened.

Our support takes the form of several initiatives to ensure that the children, the elderly, monks and others who have fled Burma are protected and cared for.

Support for families being deported

Every day the Thai authorities arrest up to three hundred Burmese in the Mae Sot area. They are kept overnight in overcrowded cells at the Police Station. The following morning they are taken to the Immigration Detention Centre where they are processed, locked up again and then eventually deported. Some of those deported are picked up by



Just think what it must be like for the children at the Immigration Detention Centre. Here an immigration official, wearing a face mask, gives them soya milk, paid for by IRT.

the Burmese military, while others slip away and return to Thailand after a few days,

I found it deeply upsetting to see so many young children being imprisoned before being deported back to Burma. I was given permission to visit the children in prison and was close to tears seeing them just sitting in rows, no fun or laughter, just terrified of what would happen to them.



A mother and her children newly arrived in Thailand, their lives turned upside down, but safe at least.

Our project has a very good relationship with the Thai authorities and we have access to both the Police Station cells and the main Immigration Detention Centre. We provide blankets and sleeping mats, basic medical supplies and soya milk for the children. We also wish to improve the living conditions at both centres, such as constructing proper sanitation facilities.

While we cannot stop the families being deported we will continue to do all in our power to ensure they are properly cared for while being held.



An elderly lady, alone and grieving. How grateful she is for the food IRT supplies to her and many others like her.

Supporting the needs of Burmese arriving in Thailand

We support a small information and counselling service in Mae Sot for those refugees who continue to arrive following the recent demonstrations. The project provides advice, access to medical care and help with finding safe accommodation. This project has already helped several of the monks who took part in the September protests and many pro-democracy activists. There is nowhere else for these people to turn to and this service is a life-line for them.

Supporting Burmese living in Thai villages

Many Burmese take refuge in small Thai villages where they are able to get food in return for providing agricultural labour, such as planting and tending rice paddies. These Burmese are not safe from deportation but at least they are able to get some food and basic shelter. IRT supports the supply of additional food each month to four such villages and in particular we help the elderly and the infirm.

Schools

There are two schools established by the refugee communities and IRT wants to repair the run down

existing buildings and construct new ones. We also want to provide lunch for the children, salaries and training for the teachers, as well as supplies for the school such as exercise and text books, pencils, pens and sports equipment.

Outreach to the Shan

This project takes place in the mountainous area of Thailand on the Burma border between Mae Hong Son and Mae Sot. As in Mae Sot, the Shan people have not been allowed to register as refugees, thus they have no status, protection or rights. IRT began supporting this work in 2003 and it is so important that we continue because, here again, there is no one else to help.

There are only two staff members who cover a very large geographical area. I travelled with them through the mountains visiting many of the small projects they are responsible for. They spend the evenings in small guest houses and at the weekend return to the main town in the area to be with their families. I was particularly impressed with their dedication and wonderful working relationship they have with the people they are helping. It is incredible how they are able to manage so many small projects spread over such a huge region so effectively.



Project workers, who work incredibly hard, with the headmistress of one of the schools for refugee children. It is so important that the children continue to be educated if they are to have any hope in life.

The project focuses on the following activities:

Education

Small groups of Shan refugees have established community schools for their children. We provide support to maintain the school buildings, provide scholastic materials, training for teachers, basic health care provisions for the children and scholarships for students to attend secondary and vocational schools.



If only their waking lives were so peaceful. Refugee children at one of the orphanages which IRT donors have been supporting for several years.

We have also started to establish small income generating projects within the schools such as pig and chicken rearing and cultivation of vegetables. These projects are vital in order to ensure the schools do not become too dependent on our support.

Orphanages

We support three small orphanages that are home to some 120 children. Here we have helped with the building of dormitories and provided furniture and bedding, clothing, food and again small income generating projects. However, there is still a huge amount we need to do to make sure the children are living in acceptable conditions and we will continue, hopefully with your support, to improve the orphanages over the coming year.

Landmine Victims

I was taken to the border and two hundred yards away in Burma could see a military emplacement. Between that camp and the Thai border is a No Man's Land which is peppered with landmines. In fact, in the whole of the border area between the two countries and within the forests of Burma, there are estimated to be over two million landmines. Hundreds of men, women and children have lost their limbs or even lives because of this diabolical and indiscriminate weapon. We support a small centre for landmine victims. The centre is run by two men who are landmine victims themselves and who have been trained to make and fit artificial limbs. The centre is a building donated by a Thai family who want to help these unfortunate people.

I am sorry to say that even if there was democracy tomorrow and a full scale programme began to clear the landmines, it would take over a **hundred years** to clear them all. These really are one of the most inhumane weapons ever created by man.

Conclusion

I was overwhelmed by the beauty of Northern Thailand and the warmth and friendliness of its people. Before I travelled to the area I believed I had a good understanding of the issues facing the refugees. However, I learnt a lot more about the problems they face and their fascinating culture. What amazed me more than anything is how little is being done to help the majority of Burmese in Thailand. This is yet another example of IRT stepping in and supporting well focussed projects that have been completely overlooked by the larger development and aid agencies.

All the appeals we make to the Friends of IRT are so important and this appeal is no less so. I hope and pray that one day in the near future there will be democracy in Burma and that its people living in Thailand and other countries will be able to go home and rebuild their lives. Until that happens IRT is committed to give whatever support it can. But this is only possible with the help of donors such as you. Please make a donation to IRT and its work with the Burmese refugees in Thailand. Together we can make such a big difference to the lives of so many.

As always, may I thank you for your wonderful support.

Best wishes,

Adrian Hatch

Adrian Hatch
Chief Executive



Here I am with project leaders distributing food in one of the villages. I visit every project once a year to increase my understanding of the problems all refugees face and to ensure that the very best use is made of your donations.