

March 2004

DEAR FRIENDS

When I last wrote to you we were dealing with the dreadful event of the attack by the LRA on the Redeemer Children's Home. The response to this appeal has been wonderful and I don't just mean in terms of money raised. We have had so many kind letters of support and the promise of prayers for the children. It has been a difficult time for everyone involved but your support has given us all such encouragement. There will be a full update about the children and the building of the new home in the summer Newsletter.

What is really difficult sometimes is making sure that I give all the projects we are helping the attention that they deserve. While what happened at the children's home was dreadful and deeply distressing, at the same time work had to continue to help people who are suffering in other parts of the world.

It is heartbreaking that there are so many refugees all over the world. So many people who are the victims of injustice and violence. It's hard not to feel overwhelmed sometimes but I try and remain focussed on what we can do and not give up in the face of what we can't.

BURMESE ETHNIC MINORITIES FORCED TO FLEE

In November I went back to the Thai Burma border to check on the projects that help the poor Burmese refugees who cross into northern Thailand. There is no let up in the brutal military regime in Burma and more and more of the Burmese ethnic minorities have no option but to flee across the border into Thailand. Their villages are burnt, crops destroyed and the area mined by Burmese soldiers so that they cannot return. If they don't try to escape they are put into forced labour for the army, even children. If any of the Shan villagers fall into the hands of the Burmese soldiers while they are trying to escape they are tortured, raped and killed, even young girls.



Escaping from Burma is dangerous. When children arrive in Thailand they are exhausted, frightened and hungry.



Shan refugees have no protection and no access to humanitarian aid or refugee camps.



The region is beautiful and yet such terrible abuse happens just the other side of the mountains.

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The water tanks that your donations have made possible make a big difference at the orphanages.



The orphanages are modest and clean and built in the traditional style.



The orphaned children and house parents in front of the new water tank.



A crop of chillies dries in front of the dormitories and new water tank.

We are focussing our help in the north of Thailand to help the Shan people who are an ethnic minority escaping from Burma. The Thai Government refuses to recognise the Shan as refugees or provide camps for them. The lack of recognition of the Shan as refugees means that these desperate people have no protection, no access to humanitarian aid, and are vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking. They are also in constant danger of being deported back into the hands of their abusers.

We remain focussed and small in what we do, helping the most vulnerable of an already very vulnerable group. Your donations are supporting 2 small orphanages, supplementary food to children, small schools for refugee children, blankets, medical help, and emergency aid for new arrivals.

Once I reached the north of Thailand I had a long drive ahead on incredibly twisting mountain roads right up to the border with Burma. The region is awe inspiring and beautiful, and it is incongruous to know that such terrible things happen just the other side of the mountains.

CARE FOR ORPHANED CHILDREN

We finally arrived at our destination where we are specifically helping two orphanages, one Christian and one Buddhist. The first orphanage is home to 25 children. There are 8 girls and 17 boys; their parents died either during their escape from Burma or just after they arrived in Thailand. When I arrived at the orphanage the children were all at school which gave me a chance to talk with the house parents, who are from the same tribe, and see around the home. It is built in traditional style and is modest and clean. The house parents are good builders and with some local help have done an excellent job of erecting new bamboo buildings to house latrines and washing facilities for the children. The new water tanks that your donations made possible make a huge difference and have certainly improved the standard of hygiene. The agriculture is also coming along well and the older children all help to look after the vegetable garden and the chickens.

The children arrived back for lunch and seemed to be excited and happy to see us. There was a lot of laughter and teasing as they showed me their beds and the new water tank, and a crop of chillies which were laid out neatly to dry. Your donations have helped to provide these things as well as food, soap, blankets, medicine, seeds and clothes.

The Buddhist orphanage is a short distance away and was founded by an elderly monk. There are 27 children, 19 boys and 8 girls. Again the children are able to attend the local school and your donations

have helped to provide the same things as those for the children in the other orphanage, including a 'house mother', which is important for all the children but particularly the little girls. The children are expected to help run the home and help with the cooking, cleaning and gardening.

FAMILIES NEED HELP TOO

In some way the future for the orphaned children is a little more secure than for the children whose parents are still alive. These families can be sent back across the border with no notice, even though they have no home or village to return to, and are certain to be killed or tortured if they refuse to act as slave labour for the Burmese army.

With no refugee camps to live in these families are considered to be illegal refugees. Some of them find employment but always doing jobs that others don't want to do and at a much lower rate of pay. There are many orange orchards in this part of Thailand and the refugees are employed to spray the pesticides. They are not given any kind of protective clothing and as a result many of them get sick. They have no access to health care unless it is charitable and that is scarce. Your donations are helping to provide medical help to some of the most urgent cases.

EDUCATION, FOOD AND MEDICAL HELP

Your donations help to support small schools for the children of these refugees so that they can learn the Thai language and in time are assimilated into local schools. Your donations also pay for protein drinks and biscuits for the children. Many of them arrive for school having had no breakfast and hungry children cannot learn. At least this small meal at school means that they will have had some food that day.

Your donations also fund a small amount of medical help for emergency cases. In addition to this many people are injured by land mines as they try and escape from Burma, and we help by providing basic prosthetic limbs. Last year, thanks to your donations, we were able to give medical help to 3,110 Shan refugees who had no one else to turn to.

EMERGENCY AID FOR THE MOST DESPERATE

I visited a small group of Shan people who had escaped from the same small village in Burma and had been living in the grounds of a small Buddhist temple just on the Thai side of the border. Even there they were not safe from the Burmese army who shelled them from



The children at the Buddhist orphanage with the elderly monk who founded it.



Delivering food at one of the orphanages. Noodles are a real treat for the children and are added to the vegetables that they grow.



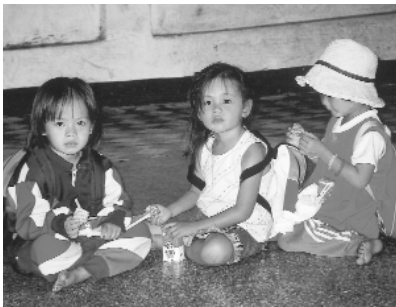
The Burmese army lay mines near villages to stop the Shan from returning. Your donations help to provide medical help and prosthetic limbs.



It can get very cold in the mountains at night and here Shan children each receive a blanket to help keep them warm.



These small schools help the children to continue with their studies and learn the Thai language.



Thanks to your donations these 3 little girls are receiving a drink and biscuit at school. For many of the children it will be the biggest meal of their day.



On the Thai side of the border I could see the Burmese guns pointed in our direction and hear the soldiers. There is no question that the Shan are fleeing fighting.



This grandmother is so grateful for the urgently needed medicine she has received. Your donations made this possible.

their side of the border. I went to this site and saw the burnt out bamboo huts that had been these people's makeshift homes. Standing there I could see the guns on the other side of the border still pointing towards the temple, and hear the soldiers laughing and talking.

No one would give these people an official site to live on, so the Buddhists helped again and gave them a small piece of land on which to shelter. Your donations have helped to provide some bamboo to build shelters, rice, cooking pots, blankets and some chickens and seeds to start to provide future food.

This is what it means to be a refugee. To be completely unwanted, to have no rights, no home, no security, no justice, no matter how hard you are prepared to work or fit in. Whether I am talking to refugees from Sudan, Burma or Eritrea they tell me the same thing, they simply want to go home and live in peace in their own culture.

Because these refugees cannot live in a camp and be registered they are not entitled to anything. They are not supposed to work so how can they earn money to eat and live? If they do work this makes them illegal, and periodically they are rounded up by the Thai army and sent back across the border, even though everyone is aware of what awaits them. These people live in great insecurity and they are terrified of being sent back to their abusers.

The Shan people are very industrious and dignified, they are not economic migrants, they are people who have literally had to run for their lives. They don't want to be a burden, they want a chance to survive.

And that is why we continue to try and help but we can only do it with your support.

It costs £35 a month to provide each child at the orphanages with all the care and education that they need, that is £1,820 a month to support all the orphans. We want to continue to help these people who are victims of such dreadful abuse in their own country and forced to become refugees. Please help us to go on supporting the families and orphans by sending a donation today. I promise you that we will use your donation very carefully so that it will continue to help as many people as possible.

Thank you as always for your tremendous generosity and support.

With best wishes

Francesca Roberts

FRANCESCA ROBERTS
Executive Director