



Twin sisters, Lin Lin and Leh Leh, wearing their new school uniform in Myanmar.

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## Kayin State returnees from Thailand say ‘it’s nice to be home’

3 September 2018 – WAW LAY MYIANG, Myanmar – Shrieks of delight filled the air as a gaggle of young girls played jumping rope in the early morning in Ward 1 of Waw Lay Myaing, a small town in Myanmar’s Kayin State situated on the border with Thailand.

For twins sisters Lin Lin and Leh Leh, 11, after a lifetime of living in exile in Thailand, these are exciting times. They have just returned home to Myanmar with their family and have already made friends in their new neighborhood. The lush neighborhood, green from the monsoon rains, not only offers new space for the girls to play, but also a new primary school for them to attend.

“We are happy to play here,” Lin Lin told UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, “And we want to go to the school in our new school uniform soon!”

Until early May this year, the twins had only known the school in Umpium refugee camp in Thailand, where the family had lived for many

years. Umpium is one of nine camps that have provided shelter to some 97,000 refugees – mostly ethnic Karen and Karenni along the Thai-Myanmar border.

Their mother, Myint Than, 43, said, “Living in the camp was never a permanent solution. For the future, especially for the children, we decided it is better to return.”

They contacted camp authorities and UNHCR in 2017 after hearing that that refugees could voluntarily return to Myanmar through a formal government and UNHCR-facilitated process.

The instability and conflict that long plagued Southeast Myanmar has subsided in recent years, and development is slowly coming to the region, prompting the first group of 71 refugees to return home through the formal process in October 2016, followed by a second group of 93 in May 2018. Another roughly 15,000 refugees have come back to the Southeast through spontaneous, individual returns since 2012.





Myint Than sits inside her family's grocery shop.

Myint Than and her husband Ah Soe, 40, decided to go to Waw Lay Myaing with their five daughters, who range in age from 15 to 5 years, as Myint Than is from the town and they can initially stay with her family.

After only a few months, they already opened a small grocery shop and planted a vegetable garden, thanks to help from Myint Than's brother-in-law. Myint Than runs the shop, while she and her eldest daughter, Khin Nin Way (15), also carry out day labor and sell vegetables at the local market to make ends meet. She feels safe and confident they can make a living in the town, where many residents rely on trade with nearby Thailand.

*“After we returned home, we felt we have freedom and can live in our own community. In the camp, we felt insecure about the future. Even though we received food assistance and were well protected, we didn't know what our future would look like,” said Myint Than.*

Her husband Ah Soe, said, “I can see that there have been changes and a lot of development in Kayin State since we left, especially in the physical infrastructure.”

Ah Soe, who has been ill and required open heart surgery in Thailand in 2016, continues to take medication to treat his condition.

His health condition weighs heavily on him and his family, and has become an even greater concern since their return, as medicine for his condition is not available near Waw Lay Myiang.

As a consequence of his long-term illness, Khin Nin Way dropped out of school a few years ago while living in the camp in Thailand, to help assist her mother to provide for the family. “My father's health condition doesn't allow him to work,” she told UNHCR, “As the elder daughter, I stopped my education to take responsibilities for the family.” She is now considering vocational training opportunities, following the return monitoring visit made by UNHCR.

Before their return, UNHCR counseled the family, sharing information about conditions in Waw Lay Myaing, such as the security situation and access to services and livelihood opportunities, to ensure that they had sufficient information to make an informed decision.



Myint Than plants vegetables in the garden.





Ah Soe, Myint Than and their daughters stand in front of the grocery shop.

As part of the authorization process, they also underwent a Pre-Nationality Verification Process with the Myanmar authorities in July 2017. As part of that process, a Certificate of Identity - or “COI” - was prepared for them to use as a temporary travel document, which was given to them by Myanmar authorities on the day of departure.

They were also advised by UNHCR to bring any identity documentation, medical, training and education certificates with them. Before they left the camp, they underwent a fit-to-travel medical check by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), while Humanity & Inclusion (HI) provided a refresher mine-risk education session.

UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) also provided around THB 56,000 (USD 1,700) cash assistance to cover transportation, reintegration support and the equivalent of six months of food before their departure. They also received

household kits with mosquito nets, sanitary kits for women, travel bags and plastic folders for keeping their documents. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) provided each family with a hygiene and water-purifying kit.

On 7 May 2018, the family was among a group of refugees that were brought in vehicles arranged by IOM through supervision of the Thai authorities across the Mae Sot-Myawaddy Bridge into Myanmar, where they were received at the Kyauk Lone Gyi Reception Center in Myawaddy by Kayin State Chief Minister Nang Khin Htwe Myint and dozens of other officials.

During the reception ceremony, each family received additional cash grant support from the Myanmar Red Cross Society and Kayin State authorities, totaling around MMK 600,000 (USD 400) per family.





Khin Nin Way, Lin Lin, Leh Leh, and their two younger sisters inside their home in Myanmar.

They were immediately issued with a Temporary Household document by Immigration authorities, and received their Permanent Household document the next day.

Kayin State authorities arranged transport to Waw Lay Myiang that evening, and after several hours on the road, they reached the town that night.

*“We feel as though we have returned to our own community where we have our relatives. It is nice to be back home where we are citizens,” said Myint Than, who added that the family hoped to soon find their own plot of land to build a house in the near future.*

As 15-year old Khin Nin Way looks for vocational training opportunities, and the two youngest girls are too young to attend school, the twins are counting down the days until the beginning of the new school year. Although they are little worried that the school will be different to what they are used to in the camp, they are excited to start, focusing instead on their future dreams.

“When we grow up we want to be teachers, so we can create a happy place for children to learn!” exclaimed Leh Leh as she hopped back to her friends.

*The story of Ah Soe, Myint Than and their family highlight the mixed array of opportunities and challenges that lay ahead as they start to rebuild their lives in their home country.*

For more information, contact:

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