

THAILAND-MYANMAR CROSS-BORDER BULLETIN

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Helping separated families reunite - from Ban Don Yang to Minnesota

Two months after she fled her home in the Tanintharyi Region of Myanmar and sought refuge in Thailand, Malee Yar attended her first World Refugee Day celebration in Ban Don Yang camp. On that June morning in 2006 she watched a group of boys and young men dancing and singing a traditional Karen song as part of the festivities. She admits she was actually only watching one of the dancers - a young man she had never seen before that morning, but whom she remembers as *"very handsome...like a model from a magazine."* Malee was tasked with a group of girls to honour the boys' performance and when the song was over, she bee-lined it to the handsome stranger and nervously placed a chain of flowers around his neck. Five months later, Malee and Ell Phar were married in a simple religious service in her small bamboo shelter.

In 2006, just as Malee arrived in Ban Don Yang, the Royal Thai Government stopped assessing claims of new arrivals to the camps along the border. While new arrivals were allowed to settle in the camps, they remained unregistered. In the eight years since, over a thousand couples - many, like Ell Phar, arrived prior to 2006 and were registered by the Government, while others like Malee, arrived after 2006 and remained unregistered - met, fell in love, married, and started families.

In most ways, unregistered residents receive equal treatment in Thailand. Agencies providing services along the border do so regardless of a person's status, so unregistered residents are able to access food, water, shelter, health services, and education. There is one crucial way, however, in which unregistered residents are more disadvantaged than those who are registered in the camps - they are unable to resettle.

For years resettlement has been the only durable solution available to the refugee population along the Thai-Myanmar border. Since 2005, over 90,000 registered Myanmar refugees have departed Thailand to start life afresh in the United States (US), Canada, Australia, and other refugee receiving countries, including in the European Union (EU). By far the majority have been absorbed by the expansive resettlement programme of the US Government. For many, it is a chance to build a new life for themselves and their families in an environment unconfined by the boundaries of a refugee camp.

Because unregistered residents are unable to resettle, many families like that of Malee and Ell Phar, comprised of both registered and unregistered individuals, have faced an extremely difficult decision - to split the family up in order to give registered family members a chance at a new life or to remain together in the camp where opportunities are limited and dreams remain unrealized.

Helping separated families reunite – from Ban Don Yang to Minnesota (continuation)

After much thought, Malee and Ell Phar decided that Ell Phar should go to the United States. Malee and their young daughter, Ray Smar Paw, would remain in Ban Don Yang. *“We talked about it a lot,” says Malee. “Ell Phar did not want to leave us behind but I encouraged him to go. I thought he should have a chance and that he could build a life for himself and for us and that maybe, one day, we would come together again. We trusted each other and believed in each other.”*

In November 2010, a van arrived in Ban Don Yang to take Ell Phar to Bangkok where he would board a plane for the long flight to the US. Ell Phar kissed his wife and his one-year-old daughter, told them he loved them and would miss them, promised to find a way to get in touch within three days, and left. *“It was a horrible day,” remembers Malee. “I didn’t walk him to the van. I said goodbye in our house and then stayed inside with Ray Smar Paw. I knew if I watched him drive away I would be unable to control my tears, which would make both my husband and my daughter sad.”*

Ban Don Yang camp sits deep within the jungle along the Thai-Myanmar border. There are no phone lines, no power lines, no postal delivery, and no internet. Almost everywhere in camp there is also no mobile phone service. However, determined residents have discovered that if they climb up the rocks and through the bush to the top of three tall hills, they get a bar of signal on their phones.

In the four years since Ell Phar has been away, the young family has worked out a system to remain close and connected. Up to three times a day, Malee and Ray Smar Paw trek to the top of a hill, where they sit on a rock and await the phone to ring. Ell Phar, armed with a special phone card he receives from a friend, calls for short chats every day – before he goes to work, during his lunch break, and when he arrives back to his apartment at the end of the work day.

Even from afar, Ray Smar Paw has her father wrapped around every one of her little fingers. She sings songs to her dad over the phone. She tells him of her nursery school adventures. She tries out her few English words for him. A few months ago, in talk typical of five-year-olds, she said *“Daddy, I miss you. I wish I had an apple.”* Ell Phar called a friend and a basket of apples – a fruit rarely seen in camp – was delivered to Ray the next day.



*Finally reunited: little Ray Smar Paw
hugged by her mother Malee Yar and her
father Ell Phar at home in Minnesota*

During a phone call last year, Ray Smar Paw begged her dad for a party dress and shoes with little heels. *“Ell Phar wanted to buy the dress in the US and ship it here, but I told him no way... too expensive,”* said Malee. *“I found something cheaper here, wrapped it in a package, put Ray’s name on it, and pretended it came in the mail from the US. She was so excited.”*

At Christmas every year, Malee and Ray leave the camp and hike for several hours to a nearby town where they skype Ell Phar so they can both hear his voice and see his face. Neighbors of Malee shake their heads at the love and devotion within the family and agree that Ell Phar is a wonderful father and husband and Malee an incredible mother and wife.

In 2012, after much discussion, UNHCR and the Royal Thai Government agreed on a process by which families such as Malee’s could be preserved and protected. Unregistered immediate family members of resettled refugees are identified by UNHCR and submitted to the Ministry of the Interior (MOI). Ministry staff interview the families in camps to verify relationships, and dossiers are then presented to a provincial panel which decides whether the individuals should be registered by the Government for the purpose of resettling to join their spouse, child, or parent in the resettlement country. To date, close to 1,500 split families have been given a chance to reunite through this process.

In December 2012, the Royal Thai Government registered Malee Yar as a refugee in Thailand, and the US government immediately began processing her and her daughter for entry to the US. On October 9th of this year, a van arrived at Ban Don Yang camp and took Malee and Ray to Bangkok, where they boarded a plane to the US. When they cleared customs at the St. Paul Minnesota airport, they walked into the terminal and saw Ell Phar waiting with a beaming face. *“We all hugged. He picked up Ray and the two of them just watched each other and smiled as we walked out of the airport,”* remembers Malee. They then drove to their new home where a huge meal, prepared by Ell Phar, was awaiting them.

After taking a week off to spend every moment with his family, Ell Phar is back at his job at a fan factory. Malee is attending an integration program to help her adapt to her new surroundings and learn about life in the US. Ray Smar Paw has spent two weeks in kindergarten and is already making friends and has been embraced by her teacher.

Asked how it feels to have her family all together, Malee says *“I love my husband. I am so happy to be with him again. But I am happiest for my daughter. She deserves to live her life surrounded by her father’s love.”*



Life skills training empowers return communities in Tanintharyi

UNHCR has worked with the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) throughout south-east Myanmar since 2004, and in 2013 launched a series of “Life Skills” training sessions, a new initiative aimed at providing “software” assistance to conflict-affected communities throughout the region. Targeting primarily villages to which refugees and IDPs have already returned to, the multi-faceted workshops tackle several topics, including health awareness, illness prevention, “four-clean” sanitation and hygiene practices, and first aid training.

Feedback from participants has been almost unanimously positive, as they acquire knowledge and skills that can be applied directly to their daily lives. For example, in a session in Katara Khe village in Dawei Township, one of the topics covered on the first day was the use of oral rehydration salts (ORS) to treat diarrhea. Participants were introduced to ORS solvent and showed how to dissolve a sachet into 1 litre of purified drinking water. They were also shown how to make their own solvent from scratch, using one teaspoon of salt and eight teaspoons of sugar.

The lesson came in handy almost immediately. On the second day of the training, one of the participants recounted that his wife had fallen ill shortly after eating Mote Hnin khar – pronounced “*mohinga*” a traditional Myanmar dish – for dinner the night before. He explained that although they had access to purified drinking water, they had never used ORS solvent until last night. After taking the ORS water, his wife recovered within a few hours.

MRCS also conducts follow-up visits to the villages a few weeks after the trainings, to survey the community’s perception of the course, answer any remaining questions, and capture feedback. During a follow-up discussion with one villager from Yar Za Bar village in Myeik Township, she recounted how the first aid component of the training was immediately put to the test in the days following the training.

The woman explained that her husband accidentally lacerated his leg while he was cutting grass with his lawn mower, resulting in serious bleeding. Although her initial instinct was to simply bandage the wound, she and her neighbours observed that this did not stop the bleeding. She quickly recalled from the training that for serious wounds, the limb should be raised above the level of the heart. This stopped the bleeding, allowed them to safely send her husband to the nearest health facility, where doctors told her that without this effective first aid response, the injury could have been life threatening.

UNHCR and MRCS plan to continue these trainings in 2015, with a continued focus on providing tangible life skills to conflict-affected communities throughout the south-east.



Life skills training empowers return communities in Tanintharyi

"It was very useful that my husband got a chance to attend the training and could practice the knowledge right away. I'll share the knowledge of making the ORS water with my villagers and as well as with my children who are now studying in Thailand so that they too could use them when necessary."



"I am so proud to gain the knowledge from the Life Skills training that I could seek medical attention for my husband and save his life on time. It was very beneficial for me to attend the Life Skills Training and be able to provide first aid assistance to the villagers and save people life during emergency situation."

Tales of ordinary resilience

Below are examples of UNHCR's landmine survivors assistance projects in Thandaunggyi Township, northern Kayin State, which was piloted in parts of south-east Myanmar in 2013. Although this UNHCR/MRCS programme ended, UNHCR is actively reviewing its livelihoods strategy in south-east Myanmar, in particular to ensure survivors such as Saw Ya Ngwe and Sai Woon Soe receive the assistance they need.



Avoiding the trap of debts after a landmine incident

An accident can be very costly. Not only are there medical expenses related directly to the treatment but also the price of transportation to reach the hospital or clinic, food and accommodation costs for family members accompanying the injured, and of course the loss of income caused by the misfortune.

It is common practice in Myanmar that upon the arrival to a hospital, the patient is informed about the estimated costs of medical treatments, and in the case of an emergency, the patient is also asked if he/she will be able to pay the bill. Additionally, the type of drugs prescribed to the patient will also vary depending on what the patient can afford. All this places an incredible burden upon anxious patients and their families.

However, knowing in advance about the UNHCR and MRCS assistance program last year, whereby cash support is provided to survivors of landmine incidents, Sai Woon Soe and his family members felt comforted and relieved about the financial headache of these medical expenses.

During the hospitalization period, Sai Woon Soe and his family were provided with a meal allowance for two persons amounting at 7,000 Myanmar Kyats (around 7 USD) per person per day. Because they cooked rice and curry in an allotted place within the hospital compound they even managed to save some money for other things they needed.

Upon receiving support for the transportation costs for the return trip to their village, Sai Woon Soe was able to organize a suitable and comfortable mode of transportation without having to worry about dangerous motorbikes or expensive taxi fares.

Although the injury caused by the landmine incident was no doubt serious, the survivor acknowledged that the physical and mental suffering for him and his family was reduced to some extent by cash support from UNHCR and MRCS.

Had it not been for the cash support, Sai Woon Soe and his family would have had no choice but to borrow money or sell their cows, farm and/or garden, all options which would have had a major long-term impact on their livelihood and ability to sustain themselves.

Pig breeding more than simple livelihood activity

Holding a small piglet tight in his arms Saw Ya Ngwe walks towards his youngest son who is sitting in front of the family house. The boy is thrilled at the sight of the cute little animal and happily strokes him.

"Does the piglet already have a name?" the young boy asks his father.

To his surprise, Saw Ya Ngwe proudly let him choose a name for the piglet. The boy decides to nickname the pig 'Par Thoo', which means morning in the local dialect.

Saw Ya Ngwe, a father of three, has been raising pigs since 2013 when he was selected as a beneficiary of a livelihoods support project for survivors of landmine incidents which UNHCR and MRCS piloted last year.

Raising the pigs in a pen made entirely of bamboo poles, as is the tradition in the area of Thandaunggyi in the northern part of Kayin State, he started with only three piglets, one male and two females.

Thanks to his attentive care and to his delight, after six months, a sow (female pig) delivered eight piglets! By selling the eight piglets Saw Ya Ngwe made a profit of 32,000 Myanmar kyats (the equivalent of more than 30 USD). With this he was able to support the costs of his son's education and even put away some money for future investment.

Saw Ya Ngwe first met with UNHCR and MRCS after he was injured by a landmine explosion in February 2012 and lost his left leg. Less than three years later, he now has a flourishing agri-business.

"I really had no idea what 'assistance to landmine survivors' was before I received it. Through livelihood assistance on raising pigs, I'm pleased that, although I was handicapped, I can still support my son's education"



Rebirth of a school

The Karenni Social Development Center is rebuilt by its own students after being destroyed by floods in Ban Mai Nai Soi

Unprecedented heavy rains during the month of September resulted in flash flooding in Ban Mai Nai Soi camp. Set in Mae Hong Son province near the Thai-Myanmar border, the camp is home to 11,800 refugees, primarily from Kayah State. The floods resulted in the deaths of two refugees as well as considerable physical damage in the camp affecting a total of almost 700 people.

After discharging all their rain, the clouds have since disappeared, but in the camp many buildings were left in ruins and the camp's inhabitants have lost other valuable infrastructure. Around twenty homes were totally destroyed and the families moved in with relatives while their residences were being rebuilt by The Border Consortium (TBC), while dozens more were only partly damaged, the refugees lost various items that were replaced by UNHCR and the humanitarian community.

Several community facilities were damaged, including five schools as well as non-governmental organisation (NGO) and community-based organisation (CBO) buildings. One of the two health clinics in the camp was badly hit with extensive damage to the facility, its equipment, and medical supplies. The flood also caused significant damage to the camp's road network and forty bridges used by the camp were entirely destroyed. The heavy rain also triggered several landslides that damaged six Thai villages in the surrounding area.

Immediately after the floods, UNHCR worked in close cooperation with NGOs and CBOs operating in the camps to deliver emergency assistance to those in need. The Mae Hong Son provincial authorities, together with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), arranged for the replenishment of the

damaged pharmaceutical warehouse and the affected clinic.

Among the schools hit, the Karenni Social Development Center was the most devastated. When the water level finally receded, the only thing remaining was the director's office. The main building had been completely destroyed and with it the classrooms, the chairs, the desks, and books, leaving students with nothing to work with.

On the very day after these destructive floods, the students put themselves to work and started cleaning the large empty ground where their school used to be. Within a few days, the debris was cleared and the reconstruction started. With the help of TBC, which provided the necessary materials, the students, their families and friends built a brand new school at the very same place as the old one, all in less than two weeks. By the end of September, the classes had restarted and the students' lives were back to normal.

"There is no doubt that education is the key to progress for any nation. I feel delighted to see this beautiful school reopening so soon after being devastated. The help of the NGOs and the willingness of parents and friends of the students to help rebuilding it were incredibly touching. I hope we manage to build more schools and the Karenni Education Department will provide more teachers to ensure that every child is educated,"

said Mr Myar Reh, the director of the Social Development Centre, on the opening day.

"This is an investment that not only fulfills the basic rights of our youth, but also contributes to the future of our community. I urge all parents, teachers and community members to take ownership of this school and the whole education system and ensure that every child gets a proper education, especially young girls", he added.

*"There is no doubt
that education is the
key to progress for
any nation"*

Mr Myar Reh, the director of the
Social Development Centre



Life in the Kayah State Su Sees

As progress is being made across south-east Myanmar in terms of development and talks of a nationwide ceasefire agreement, the changing reality is beginning to have an impact on the many people affected by displacement in and from this corner of Myanmar.

UNHCR in Kayah State has spent time listening to the hopes, aspirations and concerns of internally displaced persons - or IDPs - some of whom are keen to return to their original villages, while others remain wary of what the future may hold.

In the early 1990s, combined villages - or *Su Sees* - were established by the Government on the outskirts of the main villages across Kayah State to provide shelter for IDPs fleeing conflict. The combined villages, as the name suggests, were populated by IDPs from a number of different villages. More than twenty years later, significant numbers of IDPs remain in the *Su Sees*. UNHCR witnesses many struggling to achieve sustainable livelihoods, others have trouble accessing basic services, but in general people report a sense of safety and security - something that had been missing from their lives for many years.

The *Su Sees* were traditionally established in areas either adjacent to poor quality or insufficiently small plots of land, often some distance away from cultivable land. This has meant that, for many of the *Su See* residents who are farmers, access to livelihoods has been at best problematic and at worst simply unachievable.

This difficulty might be why one perceives there is a real sense of collective effort in the *Su Sees*, where the burden of

agricultural labor is shared, together with the benefits that are reaped from the land. Given the distance from the land and the poor soil quality nearby, a significant number of younger people - mostly males - have re-established themselves in or near to their villages of origin, where access to land and livelihoods is less of a challenge. Remaining cautious given the precariousness of the peace process, many IDPs are opting to retain two households - one in the *Su See* and another in the original village - so as to spread their risks. Those who have returned tend to be young and fit men who can farm the land and therefore ensure that food can be provided regularly to their families back in the *Su See*.

Those remaining behind, conversely, tend to be the elderly, widows, female-headed households, the disabled, families with young children or those who need to access education services. As one IDP reported to UNHCR: *"Life without an education is like being blind. We want the new generation to be well educated"*.

For that, many have been forced to put their hopes of returning to their homeland on hold, since schooling and other facilities in the areas of IDPs' origin are often scarce.

For others, return is not yet a viable option. Many female IDPs report a feeling of safety when living and often working in close proximity to their neighbours. The isolation of living in a remote area frightens them, and they would prefer to wait until those areas

become more populated before returning themselves. For the elderly and the disabled, the right to return is a conviction they hold dear. As one mentioned: *"If I had a safe life, I'd go back before I go to heaven"*. The realization of this desire is sadly untenable, however, due to the remoteness and inaccessibility of some villages.

"As long as we don't hear battle sounds, we know things are OK"

Older woman living in a *Su See*,
Kayah State



Life in the Kayah State Su Sees

(continuation)

The psychological impact of living an insecure life for so many years has had a lasting effect on many in the *Su Sees*. IDPs have taken the opportunity to express to UNHCR their feelings about the violence and insecurity experienced during displacement and the fear this continues to instill in them. As one older woman mentioned: *"It is better to die than to hear the sound of shooting again"*. There is a sense of optimism and hope, however, regarding the future and the peace process in particular: *"As long as we don't hear battle sounds, we know things are OK"*, she added.

For others, access to land in the villages of origin also remains an issue, since a number of IDPs reported that their farms have since been taken over by their former neighbors, and to try and

re-occupy them would only cause conflict. With this in mind, UNHCR is working closely with township authorities to deliver legal awareness training, so that people understand options open to them and have more confidence in such challenging cases.

UNHCR aims to expand its efforts with these communities in order to assist them in diversifying their livelihood options to help facilitate more self-sufficiency and self-reliance, even though they cannot yet return home. As returning to areas of origin becomes increasingly a preference for many, UNHCR is working, not only in Kayah State but across the south-east, in collaboration with the Myanmar Government and the ethnic group leadership to create the right conditions for people to plan their futures in their villages of origin in a safe, secure and prosperous way. In the meantime the *Su Sees*, despite their limitations, will continue to provide a sense of safety, community and solidarity for many IDPs facing a period of prolonged displacement.



"If I had a safe life, I'd go back before I go to heaven"

Elderly person living in a Su See, Kayah State



Law and Order: Raising legal awareness in return communities

UNHCR has held a range of successful trainings throughout south-east Myanmar over the past two years, most notably a series of durable solutions workshops conducted with various levels of government officials and with several non-state armed actors. Sessions are not only appreciated by those in attendance but are also valuable because the participants rarely enter the trainings with much, if any, background knowledge on the subjects at hand.

In an effort to broaden the scope of UNHCR's capacity building in the south-east, the office has launched a new series of trainings, headlined by legal awareness seminars in three selected townships in Kayin State. In partnership with P.E.A.C.E Law Firm, UNHCR conducted seminars in Hlaingbwe, Myawaddy and Kawkareik Townships in August and September 2014.

The training series begins by targeting key officials and agencies at township level. Although not formally a training-of-trainers, part of the responsibility of participants is then to pass on their lessons-learned and knowledge acquired to the communities they represent.

According to U San Win, the village tract administrator of Ka Mawt Ka Khu village in Hlaingbwe, the communities in his area are unfamiliar with the details of national legislation, and the training therefore empowers him to share reliable information and convey his knowledge with those who look up to him as a local leader.

Beginning with an introduction to law and the rights of citizens, the workshop covers topics such as citizenship law, land law, and laws and policies governing children, human trafficking and internally displaced peoples (IDPs). The training

concludes with individual interviews with participants in order to assess how they will apply the knowledge gained to their respective areas, particularly in regards to refugee returns from Thailand.

For U Ye Myat, a local official in Hlaingbwe, the latter point is particularly crucial. He points out that if refugees return back to their areas of origin, land may be a major issue for them, and based on the current land laws they are not entitled to reclaim their old land. The current Land Acquisition Act states that the Government can occupy agricultural land not being used for farming. With this knowledge, U Ye Myat suggested to UNHCR that he would liaise with local authorities to further discuss how to ensure refugees have access to land when they return.

The session in Myawaddy also included some members of local organisations, including UNHCR's partner - the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS). Following the workshop, U Kyaw Nay Thu from MRCS added that if the returnees come back to villages in Myawaddy, he would do his best to link them with organisations

that can support and provide accurate information on the aspects of the legal code relevant to them.

Ultimately, while the legal awareness trainings covered a broad range of issues and topics, what also emerged was some clarity on the key flashpoint issues affecting refugee and IDP returnees. In particular, many participants commented on the issue

of citizenship, which is governed by a complex system of laws and policies, and which happens to be the subject of the next series of thematic workshops on UNHCR's agenda in south-east Myanmar.



KYO and UNHCR collaborate to keep refugees informed

The situation in south-east Myanmar has evolved dramatically in the past few years and understandably refugees are interested in this changing environment. In recognition of this thirst for information, UNHCR and its partners have launched several initiatives to disseminate information to refugees to ensure they are up to date on developments in Myanmar.

One of these endeavours is a partnership between Karen Youth Organization (KYO) and UNHCR Thailand, who have been collaborating since June 2014 to bring news and other important information to refugees in the three refugee camps in Tak province.

For some time, the UNHCR Thailand Border Operation Information Management Unit (IMU) has been producing Media Monitoring Reports, a summary of the main news items from the Myanmar - Thailand border region, with emphasis on those which concern IDPs and refugees issues. The ultimate purpose is to enable refugees to make freely informed decisions concerning their future lives, including the possibility of a voluntary return home. It is therefore crucial not only that the information shared is up-to-date and accurate, balanced and impartial, and concerns the socio-economic, human security, humanitarian and development situations in south-east Myanmar, but most importantly is actually received and digested by the intended audience.



To that end, KYO has been an active participant in this collaborative effort to help inform refugees. This includes playing a major role in selecting the most efficient spots for information dissemination, coordinating with focal points at these locations to ensure that the reports are shared widely, and finally carrying out the challenging work of physically distributing the reports around the three camps.

After the launch in Mae La, KYO members are now also distributing the media reports to refugees in Umpiem and Nupo at various outlets such as libraries, Camp Committee offices, community-based organisation (CBO) and NGO offices, healthcare clinics, schools, mosques and tea shops. Recently, the KYO has also added the UNHCR-produced FAQs, a series of short hand-outs developed to answer the most frequently asked questions by the refugees.

KYO and UNHCR are excited to continue their collaboration by eventually extending this information-dissemination mechanism to other camps along the Thai-Myanmar border.



THAILAND-MYANMAR STORIES in CROSS-BORDER BULLETIN #6



Legend

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- UNHCR Field Office
- Refugee Camps in Thailand
- Mon State
- Tanintharyi Region
- Kayin State
- Kavah State

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