

Thailand-Myanmar CROSS BORDER BULLETIN

7th Edition
February 2016

Livelihoods Support

in Kayah State

Building Bridges

in Mon State

Singing for Birth Certificates

in Mae La Refugee Camp

Aspirations of Youth Club

in Ban Mai Nai Soi Refugee Camp

Moving on!

UNHCR Protection Officer,
Mae Sariang, Thailand

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Reverend Robert, Chairperson of
the Karen Refugee Committee



Community-Based Livelihoods Support: IDP and Refugee Return in Kayah State

Daw Boe Mae is a housewife with four children living in Daw Ngay Khu village in Demoso Township of Kayah State, Myanmar. Whilst three of her children are schooling, one infant still needs caring for, so before this project, she was not able to work to support her husband and supplement the family income. They were entirely dependent on the husband's meagre earnings through planting sesame and peanut.

However, this was insufficient for the family's basic daily needs and Daw Boe Mae had no choice but to ask for food for the next day from local sellers. Without being able to pay for the food at the time, the family was stuck in a daily cycle of debt, making life very difficult. But thanks to a new livelihoods project implemented by UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC DDG), Daw Boe Mae received support to set up a small grocery business, significantly improving her family's income level and food security situation.

Daw Boe Mae works really hard. Having received a 150,000 MMK grant from DRC DDG's livelihoods team, she was able to set up a small grocery shop at the family home and now generates a regular income of between 5,000–10,000 MMK every day. With this, she is not only able to feed her family, but is investing more in the shop. She is now also trying to diversify into pig breeding and has already bought one sow.

The income that Daw Boe Mae now earns is proving very helpful not only for the family's daily food consumption, but also for the children's educational needs.

No longer does Daw Boe Mae have to worry about how to feed her family the next day; she is able to enjoy her life and run a regular business. Her dream is to one day become the owner of a big grocery shop in Daw Ngay Khu.

U Sue Reh is a single, 46-year-old man with no family who, until recently, had been living on a subsistence basis with irregular income in Daw Ta Ma Gyi village, Demoso Township, Kayah State. Before receiving livelihoods support from UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC DDG), the income that U Sue Reh earned through casual labour and farming was just enough to pay for his daily living. Without his own agricultural tools, he had to rely on others to lend him theirs and, when this was not possible, he would be unable to work, making life very difficult.

Thanks to this project, U Sue Reh's livelihood and employment options have significantly improved.

Having received agricultural tools as well as agricultural awareness training from DRC DDG's livelihoods team, he has not only been able to earn a regular income through casual labour, preparing land for cultivation, but has also been able to start to farm his own small plot of land.

This was the first time U Sue Reh had received this type of agricultural training and with UNHCR and DRC DDG's support, U Sue Reh has been able to plant 48 cups of sesame seed and, having already harvested 6 bags of seed during July, he expects to have 4 more bags during August. With his increased earnings, he hopes that he will be able to buy enough rice for the whole year.



“Thank you DRC and UNHCR for supporting me with useful agricultural tools and training which will be very useful for my lifetime.”

U Sue Reh, August 2015

U Sue Reh , aged 46, farming in Demoso, Kayah State





Villagers, especially women, were employed in construction

Building Bridges to Enhance Access and Livelihoods

Following a bridge-building project carried out by UNHCR in partnership with the American Refugee Committee (ARC) in 2015, the inhabitants of Nang Ka Toke village in Thaton Township, Mon State, Myanmar, are enjoying improved access to services and livelihood opportunities.

Like many neighbouring communities across south-east Myanmar, the people of Nang Ka Toke village have suffered the bitter consequences of armed conflict between the Tatmadaw and the Karen National Union (KNU). The decades-long fighting forced many to leave their homes behind, with some fleeing to the Thai border and some to other villages.

Nang Ka Toke was re-established in 2011 with a small number of returnees and is now home to 59 families, totaling over 300 people. Although the fighting in the area has been over for some time, significant difficulties have remained for its inhabitants. The remote location of the village and the long period of instability have caused the socio-economic life of Nang Ka Toke to lag behind that of other places, with access to education and healthcare being key challenges.

In order to enhance the self-reliance of the community and improve opportunities for all its people, UNHCR in partnership with ARC decided to undertake a livelihoods project in Nang Ka Toke. In discussions with community members, it was identified that access to and from the village during the rainy season was a particular concern.

People in the village said that during the wet weather, the only way to cross the nearby creek – which was necessary to access the market, health services and other amenities in the neighbouring villages of Inn Ywar and Kyauk Taung – was to swim across it. This meant that the route was not only challenging but unsafe, especially for children. In fact, students from the village had to stay overnight in the neighbouring villages when the heavy rains made the creek impassable.

To address this pressing need and with feedback from the community, UNHCR and ARC decided to construct two small footpath bridges across the creek. Construction of the bridges began in April and was completed in June 2015, in time for that year's rainy season. Villagers, especially women, were employed as non-technical labour during the construction of the bridges; they earned wages above the minimum wage at market price. Where possible, materials for the bridge were procured locally.

Since the two bridges were completed, the villagers of Nang Ka Toke have reported the many positive changes that have happened. The village is now no longer isolated and shut-off during the rainy season; its inhabitants are able to travel to other villagers during that period, resulting in improved access to markets, job opportunities and basic services like health facilities.

Best of all, children no longer have to worry about how they would return home from school when the seasonal rains and flooding occurs, lowering the chances that they might drop out of school.

Committing themselves to ensuring that the project is sustained, the villagers of Nang Ka Toke have taken full ownership of the bridges with hope for a better future.



Singing for Birth Certificates in Mae La Refugee Camp

Saw Ha No, a 19-year-old resident of Mae La and the winner of the song competition.

“It is significantly important in all angles, when you don’t have birth registration you will not know your identity. You will face difficult situations including traveling.” - Saw Ha No

Entrants in the competition were asked to write songs that describe the important role that a birth certificate plays in the lives of all people. Original submissions were received in both Karen and Myanmar languages and, despite the short time frame given for song composition (just 2 weeks!), there were 7 individuals and groups who joined the performance.

“This kind of awareness activity is needed for refugee parents,” said Uncle George, Vice Chairperson of the Karen Refugee Committee (KRC), in an email to UNHCR shortly before the competition. “Some families don’t understand how much it is important to their children’s future.”

In itself, birth registration does not confer nationality upon a refugee child. But by establishing a legal record

of where a refugee was born and who his or her parents are, the birth certificate is a key way to prove if someone can acquire nationality when he or she can eventually return home.

“People who participate in the competition, people who come to hear and listen, including everyone who came and were involved in the event, will hear information and share it with others,” said Moet Moet, a 20-year-old female resident of Mae La camp who placed third in the competition. “I would say the program will benefit the community.”

UNHCR will work with other organizations to record the original songs in 2016 for broadcast in the wider refugee community living along the Thailand-Myanmar border.

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Reverend Robert Htwe
Karen Refugee Committee Chairperson

"...I would not have been happy if I had not helped my people who are facing difficulties and problems...we need to join hands together, trust each other and sacrifice ourselves for the better future."



For more than 40 years, Reverend Robert Htwe has dedicated his life for the Karen refugee community. With his strong faith and determination to help displaced Karen people, he passed through many hard days and obstacles. Yet he continues to take a stand for his community at the age of 74.

**Reverend Robert, thank you for having us today.
Could you introduce yourself to our readers?**

I was born in December 1941, in Gone Ga Lay village, Ngapudaw Township (in Ayeyarwady Region), Myanmar. My parents named me Robert Htwe. After I had graduated from middle school I went to Insein Township (in Yangon) to attend a Bible school and finished my studies around 1964. Later, I returned to my village and started doing religious work. I roamed around to several places working as a gospel worker until I arrived in the border area.

In 1975, I saw a lot of Karen people fleeing armed-conflicts. At the time, there was no NGO around so I was appointed by the church and Karen National Union (KNU) as a focal point to contact churches overseas, asking for support. I managed to give assistances for approximately 2,000 persons, and we were able to support them until 1983.

What are your main responsibilities and duty as a KRC Chairperson?

My work is to help my Karen people who ran from fighting and came to stay in Thailand. I talk to authorities on both sides of the border, meet with UNHCR, NGOs and other humanitarian organizations asking for support and arrange for assistances. I will continue my duty to support them until the day they return home.

What inspired you to work for the refugee community?

I would not have been happy if I had not helped my people who are facing difficulties and problems. My refugee community can stay safely in Thailand because of many support and assistances they received through our help.

What is your life achievement?

The refugee issue is the biggest concern for me. In 1984, the number of refugee reached ten thousand and there was not enough support from NGOs, the churches or even from KNU. However, I managed to get food and supplies to support these people by myself. This caused me to have a huge amount of debt between 1984 and 1985.

During that time I was depressed and I could not sleep because I never had this much amount of debt in my life. As a religious leader, I believe that God works in mysterious ways, so I prayed and kept praying. Finally he had his eyes on me and everything was resolved gradually. We continued to receive support and we were freed from our debt subsequently.

Even though I had such a hard time I am so proud that I have helped my people and I can say that this is my life achievement.

What are main concerns when working with the community and partners?

The main concern of working with the community and partners is understanding. I think understanding is the most important and I always prioritize this when working with others. If we don't have good understanding, we cannot collaborate and achieve our goals.

What are your thoughts about the current dynamics in Myanmar? Do you think it is moving in the direction you expected? If any, what still needs to be done?

There used to be severe fighting between the Myanmar military and KNU for decades and now the situation is changing unprecedentedly. It is a good sign for Karen people to afford peace eventually, but the next question is how we are going to work out for it.



I personally think that this change is for the better but it is also important to be careful to make sure that it will not turn into something that hurts us again. We have been suffering from this conflict long enough and I don't want to see it happen again.

It is a real challenge on how we are going to reposition ourselves towards the right direction in this development. We have to be aware not to cause harm to our people and we still have to work together harmoniously. We should not ruin this opportunity.

What is your hope for your community in the future?

I hope we will be able to achieve mutual understanding among all parties in every way. I still see that there are gaps within the community and between others who we are working with. This is very important because if we want to get things done successfully, we need to join hands together, trust each other and sacrifice ourselves for the better future.

Is there anything you would like to share with our readers?

I would like to share with all the readers that everyone can say nice words but not all of that turns into productive actions. Do not go with those sweet words but take into consideration what have been done for the community. Talking without actions does not do any good for the future.

Interviewed by Ekapoal Phongchourngeon
Field Assistant, Information Management Unit,
UNHCR Mae Sot

Aspirations of a Youth-Led Club and a Youth Leader in Ban Mai Nai Soi

“When I return to Myanmar, I will feel like a stranger in my own land. But that is ok. I learned a lot about the differences of education here and there. I want to use this knowledge to improve the education systems in Myanmar.”

*Than Tun Oo
Youth Leader,
Ban Mai Nai Soi,
Mae Hong Son, Thailand*

The Youth Club is a Karenni group made of youth ages 15-25 in Ban Mai Nai Soi Temporary Shelter. It is supported by COERR. The Youth Club began in 2014, when a group of dancers called “Black Jungle” was approached by COERR and asked if they were interested in forming a youth group. Black Jungle would perform at festivals, such as King’s Day or Queen’s Day and COERR noticed their energy. COERR encouraged Black Jungle to consider a youth group in order to increase action and participation by young people in the community; Black Jungle agreed to this opportunity, seeing the potential of having a larger impact in BMN and the Youth Club formed, with approximately 25 members. At the moment, Youth Club has around 16 members and two Youth Leaders, Than Tun Oo, who serves as BT leader and is currently a teacher in Section 14 High School, and Dee Reh, who serves as BK leader. [Due to the size of BMN shelter, the camp is divided into two zones, BT and BK].

Youth Club meets twice a month and organizes activities such as “Helping Hand” – an initiative to assist those in the community who are elderly or disabled, such as constructing and repairing homes in need, and organizing sport activities with boarding house students and CBOs. Youth Club is also active in organizing football matches within the community, as well as sports competitions. The members believe maintaining activeness is essential to good health and well-being. When Youth Club needs assistance or has an idea for a beneficial community activity, they approach COERR for support. COERR also provides life skills training for the Youth Club. Otherwise, the group is run entirely by youth and for youth.

According to Than Tun Oo, the main issues the Youth Club notices and tries to address within the community are early marriage, use of drugs and alcohol, and a pressure in not being able to leave the camp.



Than Tun Oo finds that the larger community allows worries about not being able to leave the camp as the future feels unclear for many refugees. In this, the Youth Club has goals for 2016 to bring awareness and facilitate activities that can address these concerns and help the community feel at ease with increased knowledge about their options for the future. As sports are a focus for Youth Club, Than Tun Oo also feels that using sports can help reduce worry and anxiety, and promote mental wellness. In addition, they provide an outlet for young energy, so that individuals do not succumb to using drugs and alcohol:

“Young people are healthy physically, but mentally? They are anxious. They think, after post-10, what do I do? (Post 10 is the highest level of education offered in Ban Mai Nai Soi schools). Youth Club can contribute to a healthier community with sports and activeness; this can reduce the worry and anxiety.”

Than Tun Oo exemplifies the energy and motivation of young people in BMN who strive to contribute to the community both now and in the future. Than Tun Oo finished post-10 and began teaching Science and English around 2 years ago. He has goals of continuing studies, returning to Myanmar, and obtaining a role in education in Kayah State. With a thorough understanding of the differences in education in Kayah State and Thailand, he strives to bring strong systems to improve the education offered in Kayah. While still in BMN, Than Tun Oo hopes to lead even more activities with Youth Club and work together with UNHCR colleagues to address protection-related concerns that youth have.

“When I return to Myanmar, I will feel like a stranger in my own land. But that is ok. I learned a lot about the differences of education here and there. I want to use this knowledge to improve the education systems in Myanmar.”



Than Tun Oo and his students



Moving On !



*Jane Williamson
UNHCR Protection Officer,
Head of Field Office
Mae Sariang, Thailand*

© UNHCR

It is difficult to contemplate my last trip down the winding, misty mountain road to Mae Ra Ma Luang camp. How to sum it all up? This border is a place where I could never be complacent – the refugees are organized and know what they are doing. In 2013, the Mae Ra Ma Luang camp committee proposed to build a bridge which would be strong enough to allow food trucks to pass in the rainy season. They designed it, planned it and raised the funds for it. Within a few months, there it was. A beautiful, strong and practical bridge which meant that food trucks going to the other camp would not be blocked off in the rainy season.

In both Mae Ra Ma Luang and Mae La Oon, I've seen the camp and section leaders work tirelessly to assist the vulnerable. I've seen several examples of refugees with serious mental illness and violent behavior being cared for very respectfully by leaders who were determined to protect both the ill person and the community.

I've seen time and again vulnerable people being cared for by their neighbours, section leaders and community organizations in the camp.

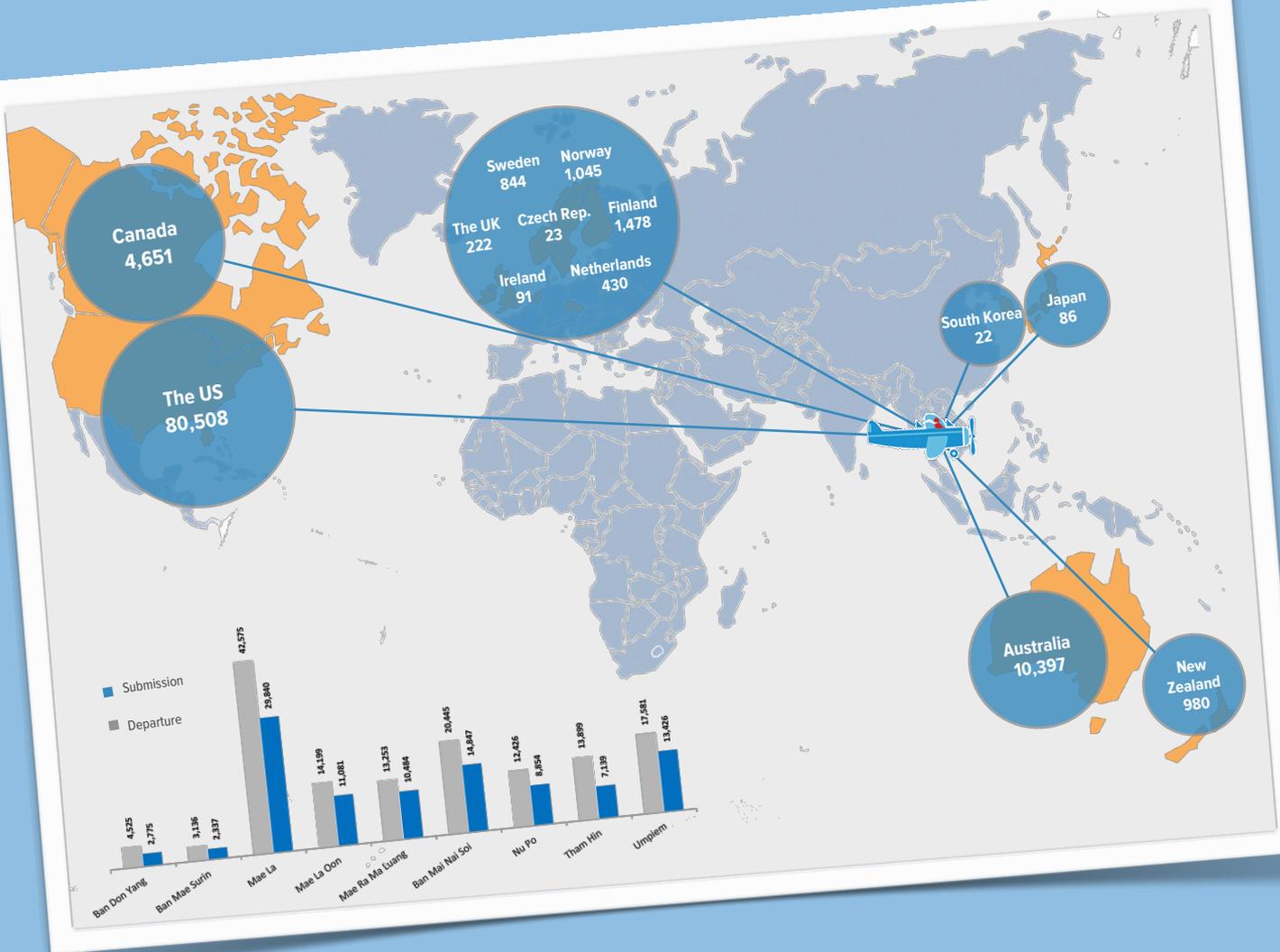
I'm so grateful for this and so grateful to take to other refugee situations such a wonderful example of an organized and caring community. It gives me a sense of optimism for their future, where-ever it may be.

After three years in beautiful Mae Sariang, I'll be moving to Seoul in South Korea. It will be my first time living in a big city, my first time in a cold country, my first time not wearing flip-flops! One of my first tasks will be to visit the 22 newly resettled Karen refugees in Seoul. I'll be bringing a care package of favourite Karen foods – chilli, tea leaf salad....maybe even fish paste!!!

Resettlement Statistics

as of 31 January 2016

100,783 individuals departed



Information Management Unit Thailand Operation

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

Contact: imumaesot@unhcr.org

UNHCR Thailand

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

UNHCR Hpa-An, Myanmar

UNHCR Field Office Hpa-An
Bogyoke, Road, Ward 9,
Hpa-An, Kayin State, MYANMAR

Visit us at

www.commonservice.info



www.facebook.com/commonservice

www.facebook.com/commonservicekaren

www.facebook.com/commonserviceburmese