



Burma Center Prague, o.p.s.



Helping Burma Through India

A project in retrospect | Grassroots views | 2009 - 2011

This booklet was published in 2011 by the Czech NGO Burma Center Prague. It aims to highlight the problems faced by refugees from Burma who live in India, but also tries to point out ways they, as active members of civil society, can contribute to the transformation of Burma towards a genuine and participative democracy.

In this spirit of involving and empowering those who are most affected, we decided give much of the space in this publication to the voices of activists who themselves are refugees. Topics covered in their articles include: Chin refugees, refugee women, health care, education, and Burmese media.





Foreword

The Czech Republic experienced a totalitarian regime before 1989, and we learned how important it was to have friends abroad who cared about the people of our country, not about having good relations with the communist government. I believe it is now our duty to demonstrate the same sense of responsibility and to promote the freedom of people in countries with totalitarian governments. Many Czech people are concerned about the continuing human rights violations and attacks against ethnic minorities in Burma, and are ready to assist the democratic forces in the country as well as those who have had to go into exile in Thailand, India, and elsewhere. I am glad that not only NGOs like Burma Center Prague or People in Need, and leaders like former President Václav Havel, but also the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic and other Czech institutions feel this responsibility and support meaningful programs to strengthen Burmese pro-democracy groups. I hope that freedom, democracy, ethnic equality, and unity will eventually prevail.

HE Jiří Šitler

Former Czech Ambassador to Burma



The Velvet Revolution: protests in Prague.



Remembering the Saffron Revolution in Prague.

Three Years of Transition Promotion for Burma Through its Western Neighbour

A Czech organization struggling in India to help the people of Burma: The reaction of people who first encounter this unusual constellation can be roughly divided into two groups. On one side are the non-believers: among all the countries, among the old and new, the rich and the poor, the big and the small members of the European Union, why has the Czech Republic – itself just recovered from the aftermath of a series of repressive regimes – decided to lend a hand to Burma? And on the opposite side are those who overestimate us: As perceived representatives of Europe, a privileged part of the world, we are assumed to have at our disposal funding for activists, resettlement options for refugees and public attention for all issues; likewise it is assumed that we operate from a comfortable financial background.

As we approach the end of this three-year project, I will take the opportunity to look back. But before I explain its history and background I shall briefly mention the underlying framework that has guided it from the moment of the first draft. A quote from this framework explains the general purpose:

“The Transition Promotion Program is a democracy assistance financial instrument of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic established in 2005. This program is aimed at support to democracy and human rights, using the Czech Republic’s recent experience with the social transition and democratization of the country. Projects within this program are implemented in cooperation with Czech civil society organizations and their local partners, underpinning the importance of civil society in democratization processes.”

Given the apparent difference between countries like the Czech Republic (previously a part of Czechoslovakia) and junta-ruled Burma, one may wonder what main experience can be transferred from the Czech transition that might benefit the people of Burma. I think at the very core it is an incorruptible ethos of defying suppression. This Czech home-grown attitude from times of totalitarianism still accounts for the stark contrast to many other nations' current policies that range from sanctions against Burma – which doesn't hurt their own economies – and engagement based on unclear benchmarks and that seems to be dictated mainly by the fear of losing ground against Asian newcomer-economies. And it is this healthy

mistrust, exhibited by citizens willing to criticize, that the world owes to the people of Burma when dealing with the Burmese government and judging their undertakings.

Therefore, the Czech transition experience is not merely something waiting to be transferred when the time is ripe. It is the force behind the present sympathy and ongoing support for the people in Burma in the first place.

Motivation

Before 2009, *Burma Center Prague* was engaged mainly in awareness raising, international networking, and participating in global campaigns as far as these activities could be implemented in the geographically limited space of Europe. The decision to focus our efforts on the Indian side of Burma eventually resulted from two observations:

1. Although the huge number of migrants to Thailand and the severity of problems in East Burma make it an indisputable necessity to direct a major amount of assistance to the Thai-Burmese border, we felt that only an inadequately small fraction of international attention was dedicated to the Western counterpart. It is crucial to our organization's understanding that the situation inside Burma and that of Burmese migrants is closely intertwined and every deliberate separation would fall short of the complexity of the whole. Even less would we recommend to force the pro-democracy groups in both of Burma's opposite neighbours into a rivalry by systematically supporting only one side.

Given, however, the noticeably developed Burmese structures in Thailand – in terms of refugee care, activism, and trans-border aid – which often makes them the first choice of Western donors and further cultivates the professional appearance of the grantees, we were convinced that much more basic work needs to be done in India. This unbalance even reached such an extent that we were not able to find a partner in India that would meet the requirements for cooperation, so that we had to help establish one as an initial part of the project.

2. India prides itself on being the world's largest democracy, a prime ally of Western powers in the region, and an aspiring new major player in politics on a global scale. In stark contrast, however, India has refused to offer legal protection to refugees on its territory and, moreover, has virtually abandoned all ethical criteria in its approach to Burma in favour of strategic considerations in Northeast India and economic interests in Southeast Asia – mainly in an attempt to counter the dominance of China, making India an important token in the Burmese government's strategy of ambiguous alliances.

No doubt, the urgency to share the privilege of democracy with the people of Burma needed to be put back in its rightful place in Indian public discussion, and all of our talks with Indian people revealed a remarkable warmth and sympathy for the destiny of their Burmese neighbours, constrained, however, by an often surprising ignorance of the situation on the ground. The perception of some kind of kinship seemed to be rooted even back in the times of colonialism and the gap was widened only during India's recent career among the community of states, while Burma's generals have most of the time prevented genuine improvement.

In July 2008 we started our first investigations into the possibility of using existing structures, and realized that establishing the opposite bridgehead needed to be an essential part of the project itself since professionally and continuously functioning activities of Burmese migrants, let alone in the form of registered organizations, were hard to find. Soon after we were relieved to learn that an organization called *Burma Centre Delhi* (BCD) had been founded by long-standing activists and academics. We then started to draft a possible joint project while consulting every projected activity with BCD, whose advice was of high importance to us as inexperienced newcomers in that region. The project took shape as a versatile ensemble of various activities that embodied the concept of the Czech Foreign Ministry's grant scheme to prepare or support the transition of undemocratic countries by capitalizing on its own experience. Activities were designed to evolve over a period of three years, and much of the first year still exhibited the fresh paint and the pioneer spirit of a pilot run.

Considering the risks of setting foot on new land, we are grateful to our donors for their trust in our then merely projected efforts and for their substantial sup-

port, which enabled us to tentatively count with three years of implementation. As outlined before, only this sufficiently long period made it possible to cultivate a field where every local access point, intermediary or recipient of assistance needed to be detected and tested in meticulous work on the ground.

Activities

The project consisted of eight segments that were mostly limited to certain periods, or had particular times of higher activity, for example during their launch. None of them existed isolated from the others, but sought to gear into each other.

1. Support of Burmese civil society in India

In this activity, our main support was directed at the previously established organization *Burma Centre Delhi*. Our project enabled them during the first two years to run an office, in an area of Delhi with a large Burmese refugee population, with several rooms and Internet access. We also funded a local coordinator and an assistant for part-time employment. At the end of 2010, BCD managed to secure financing from other sources for its core operations so that we could focus our resources on the support of other targets groups.

BCD helped us mainly in communicating with local refugee groups and other organizations where a personal visit was indispensable. The organization was very active also in many other fields beyond our project. Among others they closely integrated the local *Shwe Gas Movement* office.

It is notable that BCD has achieved fast progress in legal registration, which in India is complicated and can be jeopardized by activities that are not welcome by local authorities. Its rapid development in a short time was mainly a result of its members' previous experience, and for our project – where BCD figured at the same time as a supported output and already as a supporting partner – their quick development into an independent and sustainable operation was a great relief.

2. Support of free media

The destiny of Burma depends considerably on the question as to whether the development towards democracy is genuine or not, and what is really happening on the ground. Since the media inside the country is controlled by a censorship board and intimidated by the authorities, the free flow of information can be secured only by media that is based outside the country. But even they have to rely on clandestine correspondents who run a high risk of draconian pun-

ishment if caught, with decades-long prison sentences handed down for ordinary journalistic work.

In India, the main Burmese media outlet is *Mizzima News*, which is a member of the *Burma News International* network that brings together several exile media groups from South and Southeast Asia. The *Democratic Voice of Burma* also maintains an office in Delhi and there are correspondents for *The Irrawaddy* and others news organizations.

Apart from the general issues about support of Burmese activities in India, we found that even very professionally operating media often work with insufficiently qualified staff. Basic knowledge of journalistic work and even English language skills are anything but a given, so that even a whole edition in English might be composed by Burmese speakers and then translated. Many observers also criticize Burmese exile media for an insufficient separation of journalistic work from activism, which may be ascribed to the biographies of those involved.

In 2010, with the help of corporate sponsorships we brought three Czech journalists to Delhi. Their task was threefold: first, they would teach their Burmese colleagues about journalist skills. Second, they would learn from them about the situation in Burma and of Burmese refugees in India. And, third, they would visit along with us the recipients of our microgrants and help us promote the program.

These three journalists were chosen one each from television, radio, and Internet media, all of them with a proven track record on foreign affairs and the management of media, including promotion and income generation. During and after their trip, they published several news reports about the issues covered by the project and were able to deliver qualified background information during news reports about the 2010 Burma elections.

To address one of the main deficits mentioned by Burmese media staff and CSOs – i.e., a lack of attention by Indian media – we finished their stay in Delhi with a media workshop and press conference about Burmese refugees and the elections. This event was attended by Indian media who traditionally tends to ignore the Burmese voices in their own country, and the opening speech was given by the new Czech Ambassador to India, HE Miloslav Stašek.

3. Capacity building

During our work with Burmese civil society organizations in India in particular, we realized that one main obstacle to their crucial role in helping their own

community is a lack of capacity to manage a community organization. This starts with the fact that individuals often have very limited school education, and often don't even speak sufficient Burmese beyond their ethnic dialect, let alone English. Even higher education institutions in Burma have repeatedly been discontinued after the protests in 1988, leading to a chaotic situation of degrees and underlying qualifications.

Many refugees have considerable skills and work experience but lack the knowledge to draft a project and secure funding from abroad, and even running an organization is often overshadowed by the restrictions of a very traditional and ethnocentric society, by assigning senior posts according to the reputation in the community rather than personal experience, and by a regrettable brain-drain through resettlement.

Therefore, in addition to the above-mentioned training for Burmese journalists we provided a multi-day workshop to representatives of Burmese grassroots groups based in Delhi and Mizoram on the basics of project management and accountancy. Travel for participants from Mizoram was funded through individual stipends.

During the third year of our project, we decided that the successful completion of these courses by prospective project coordinators would be a precondition to them applying for microgrants.

4. Microgrants

Many issues of the Burmese community in India can best be addressed by members of this same community. Only they have knowledge of the situation, access to the people affected, and the necessary language skills and the commitment to dedicate their work. Burmese grassroots organizations are formed by refugees with qualification and experience in relevant fields and often operated by very pro-active and pragmatic individuals. Activities range from advisory and intermediating with Indian institutions and authorities, to income generation, healthcare, education or care for women affected by domestic violence.

Most of these groups, however, can only sustain their endeavours on a very limited scale since they finance their activities from membership fees, while their members, as refugees, are barely able to make ends meet. At this point we support small projects with small financial grants, so-called “microgrants”. Proposals are evaluated according to preset criteria and the projects awarded need to follow certain rules of accountancy and reporting. Obviously, one of the goals is to teach the grantees how to plan their activi-

ties, implement them and accept accountability for the results, and all in a way that enables them in future to better seek grants from other donors.

In contrast to the usual micro-finance programs, these supported projects do not make a profit. Therefore, grants are not expected to be repaid, unless the grantee seriously violates the rules or discovers that it will not be possible to implement the project as planned.

The microgrant scheme enabled us to ask for individual donations on the bilingual website microgrants.burma-center.org where we offer the possibility to fund grassroots projects in shares of each 500 CZK (about US\$29).

5. Networking

While our initial draft of the project envisaged facilitating networking between Burmese CSOs in India and those in other parts of the world, we soon learned that these initiatives needed more than that to be connected to their Indian counterparts. The idea of an intra-Burmese networking was therefore soon abandoned in favour of trans-Burmese networking inside India.

In 2009, *Burma Centre Delhi* organized a media workshop in Guwahati, Assam, and their coordinator and assistant for our project joined us for the conference "Burmese in Europe - Promoting Partnership for Transition in Burma" that was organized by *Burma Center Prague* in an effort to bring together Burmese pro-democracy forces from Europe, America, and Asia who are trying to achieve the same goals but disagree on the path to take. The conference also sought to promote greater understanding among key European decision makers about the relevance of Burmese living in Europe to the destiny of Burma, and was able to send this message as our contribution after the Czech Republic's EU presidency during the first half-year of 2009.

6. Fair trade

The qualifications of many refugees who came from the rural areas of Chin State are often insufficient to compete on the Indian labour market. What is more, insufficient language skills form an obstacle to employment. In particular, women who stay at home to care for their children or who are aged or physically handicapped don't have a realistic chance of contributing an income.

Burmese self-support groups have therefore set up organizations that deliver raw material to those women's homes and collect the final products. A part of the



revenue goes to the producers who mostly work on simple hand looms.

Our fair trade shop seeks not only to provide the channels to reach customers in Europe, but also to let the women's groups see how products must be designed in order to be bought and how their work is integrated in the process of planning, order, production, and sale.

7. Famine relief

During a visit of a representative of the *Chin Human Rights Organization* (CHRO), we first learned about the famine in Chin state in western Burma. Although this disaster is well documented, it has still not managed to attract adequate public attention. The main cause can certainly be found in the isolationist information policy of the Burmese regime and the remoteness of Chin land, making it often even more accessible through India than from the central parts of Burma.

The famine is caused by an exotic natural phenomenon: A particular sort of bamboo flowers only every 50 years, causing a huge increase in the rat population that devours the flowering fruit. Obviously, the rodents also invade other crops, leading to a severe food shortage. While the Burmese government would certainly have the means to help the affected population through the hard times with food delivery and tools to fight the rats, it has on the contrary burdened the people there with the presence of army camps, which traditionally steal their subsistence from the villages.

Although the *United Nations* has established a food-for-work program that needs to comply with the conditions set by the junta, it became clear that only cross-border aid can help. Our project was among the

first outside the Chin community that sought to provide this support.

Our many challenges for raising funds consisted not only in the low economic power of the Czech population, but also in the complexity of the background and a target location that must seem rather irrelevant for the usual Czech day-to-day horizon. While we could in our work for Burma refer to marching monks and Aung San Suu Kyi, it became a difficult task to inform the public about a Christian minority in Burma called the Chin, which has nothing to do with China and is probably one of the world's least known ethnic groups. Our many promotional tools were an exhibition, a campaign spot, and events. From the very beginning we had to limit the outreach to the Czech Republic.

To date, we have collected over 350,000 CZK (approximately US\$19,000). The amounts that were delivered to the aid providers have been used to buy and distribute rice during two trips inside Burma. In total we managed to supply approximately 25 tons of rice to almost 600 households, or 3,000 persons. This is an immense effort not least on the side of the partnering distributors inside Burma, who had to use very simple means of transportation like cars, boats, or pack animals.



8. The 2010 elections in Burma

The anti-democratic nature of the elections has already been proven by the underlying constitution, which was designed by the Burmese junta in order to transfer power to a military-controlled civilian government and was introduced through a questionable referendum in 2008. Nevertheless, many international stakeholders were only too eager to give their blessings to any activity labelled as democratic, which is why we decided together with many other initiatives to raise awareness about the real nature of the elections.

The main activity took place as an integral part of the media workshop in 2010, when the exact date of the elections was not yet known.

Outlook

Since last year's elections, the situation in Burma has not improved for ordinary people. In particular, the population with a lower income and less education, and that lives in remote areas and belong to ethnic minorities, does not yet enjoy better security, livelihood, and protection against discrimination and abuse. The worst situation, however, is still suffered by activists for democracy and human rights, by artists and people engaged in charitable work who are threatened by long prison terms for their activities.

Emigration to India is still one of the prime alternatives to withstanding the suffering inside Burma. Many go with the hope of being resettled into what they expect to become a golden future. It is therefore not surprising that the situation in Northeast India and in Delhi shows no sign of abating. Together with the need to solve the problems inside Burma, the crisis in India must be met with a different concept than just keeping the flow of refugees passing through this "purgatory" on the way to the First World.

Much work still has to be done in terms of establishing, empowering, and professionalizing self-support structures; raising global awareness about the situation; mobilizing support from the Indian host society; and, last but not least, opening the refugees' eyes and making them focus on their present needs and possibilities, rather than just getting absorbed in their hopes and dreams.

Christoph Amthor

Why Should We Help Burma?

What does the average Czech know about Burma these days? Perhaps that the country is ruled by a sort of strange military dictatorship that has long imprisoned local dissident Aung San Suu Kyi, and that the country is no longer called Burma, but actually Myanmar. Those who didn't sleep through geography class might even be able to find the country on a map. But few know that Burma holds a leading position on the list of countries which the Czech Republic is trying to help in their transition to democracy. But can we answer the question why it is so? Why should we care about such a far-away country?

There are perhaps more reasons than at first glance. Burma has something in common with us. During the times of the so-called internationalist cooperation, Burma was one of the friendly countries of socialist Czechoslovakia. Prague was the seat of a Burmese embassy and Burmese students came to study in Czechoslovakia. On the other side, Czechoslovak weapons made their way to Burma's then capital, Rangoon. Thanks also to these weapons, the military junta headed by General Ne Win was able to stay in power. The Czechoslovak Communists had a reason to support him. The socialist economic program, which the soldiers introduced in the country, fit into the concept of the spread of communist ideas in the world. But then the situation changed radically. The year 1989 brought the fall of communist dictatorships in Europe.

Czechoslovakia, and soon thereafter the independent Czech Republic, embarked on the path to democracy and the word capitalism lost its dark ideological meaning. But the situation was completely different in Burma. Massive demonstrations against the regime brought people into the streets since a year earlier than in European socialist cities. The 1988 protests were brutally suppressed by the Burmese military. New people came to the head of the junta, the socialist experiment ended and there was a return to private enterprise. The repressive military regime remained the same. We will never know what stance the Czechoslovak Communists would have taken towards it. The communist government soon ended and the Czechs, now breathing their newly-acquired freedom, had other worries than life in far away Burma. The Burmese embassy in Prague was closed and mutual trade all but disappeared.

But not all Czechs forgot the Burmese. Right at the beginning of 1990, shortly after assuming the presidency, Václav Havel nominated the persecuted

Burmese democratic opposition leader, Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi, for the Nobel Peace Prize.

And she won it. Who could have guessed then that the military regime in Burma would rule for the next 21 years? And for how much longer will it run the country? No one knows. The strength and stamina of this brutal regime are exceptional. So far, nothing has been able to break it. The regime has survived the ravages of Cyclone Nargis, survived the mass protests of Burmese monks during the so-called Saffron Revolution, and, as a legitimization of its rule even held elections for the first time in many years. Do not be fooled. Neither the elections nor the recent release of Aung San Suu Kyi from years-long house arrest do not change the essence of the regime. Human rights are still unheard of in Burma, and the country remains in deep international isolation. Does it really make sense to care about such a situation happening in this faraway country, where people live so differently?

Without a doubt, it does. And who could better understand the Burmese than those who themselves have personal experience of life behind the wall? The experience of totalitarianism. In this age of media soundbites, most of the Czech media has reported that the symbol of the struggle for Burma's freedom, Aung San Suu Kyi, won her personal struggle with the dictatorship. She was released. Does this mean that all of Burma is now free?

Aung San Suu Kyi is often compared to Václav Havel. He was also a symbol, a symbol of the fight with the communist regime. He was also arrested, jailed, and released. But the system did not change. In the end, the inhabitants of Czechoslovakia didn't know about his struggle and imprisonment. Certainly not through the state media. The only source of information during the times of deep totalitarianism was the foreign media, which spread free and uncensored information. In Burma's case the sole source is exile media, television and radio, in this age of modern information technologies and the Internet. And Czech aid is being offered exactly in this area of free and independent media. In a closed country, the free dissemination of information is more valuable than anything else. The work of journalists there is not easy at all. In Burma they face real danger, as do those who provide the media with inside information or insights.

I remember how, before last year's elections, reporters from *Mizzima's* exile TV in Delhi, India called

the Burmese on the phone and tried to assess the mood in the country before the upcoming elections. Few had the courage to talk to them. And no wonder. Not so long ago, the Burmese regime executed two former officers and staff from the Foreign Ministry because they gave the exile media information on the travel of General Shwe Man and other representatives of the military junta to North Korea. Burmese officials even indirectly confirmed the sentence. Undoubtedly, this is just the tip of the iceberg. But it reflects the importance that the Burmese regime attaches to the independent media in exile. What a threat they constitute in the regime's eyes. This exile media certainly deserves support from abroad.

More than twenty years have passed since the fall of the Iron Curtain and the demise of totalitarian regimes in Europe. Czechs have become accustomed to freedom and democracy. They should, however, not forget those who do not yet enjoy these values. They should not forget what a tremendous boost international solidarity represented not only to Czechoslovak dissidents. The feeling that the world knows what is happening behind the barbed wire in besieged Czechoslovakia. In the end, not even the communist regime was able to remain unaffected by criticism from abroad.

A few years ago I was quite amused by the Burmese junta's response to criticism from abroad. In 2005, Vaclav Havel and South African Nobel Peace Prize winner Bishop Desmond M. Tutu backed a critical report on human rights and the economy in Burma. This infuriated the Burmese generals so much that the official Burmese newspaper published a poem which revolved around two main criticisms. The text says:

*So worthy of praise
Havel and Tutu, flying in tandem
Searching for lice on bald head
Claim they've found them.
Won't even take a glimpse
On pate that has plenty.
Say they've lice to crow about
Quite remarkable, their prowess
Aw! these two characters
Is it because of astonishing eyes
That they won the peace prizes
Food for thought! Food for thought.*

(To two peace prize winners who are finding fault in Myanmar.)

We can see that the even the Burmese regime isn't immune to criticism. Even if the poems it produces are of a poor level. Being interested in what's going on in Burma makes sense. And not just for the notional paying of our debt for the help that others gave us not long ago. We don't expect, however, that the Burmese government will reward us with poems for helping democratize the country. They're not worth that much anyway.

Jaromír Marek



The Situation of Chin Refugees in New Delhi

I would like to briefly present you a history of Chin refugees and the lives of Chin refugees in Delhi. As I believe we are all aware of the situation in Burma, I will not go into details about it and will rather focus more on Chin state and Chin refugees.

It is estimated that there are more than 11,500 Chin refugees living in New Delhi, and they make up the majority of the refugee population in Delhi.

As we all know, a new civilian government has taken power on Burma's political scene. But we do not see any genuine transition taking place in Burma. The recent attacks on ethnic national revolutionary groups such as the Kachin Independent Army (KIA), Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), and Shan State Army (SSA) clearly show that the new government is taking on its own people, even using chemical weapons against them or reportedly 'allowing' the rape of women by Burmese soldiers. Chin state continues to see gross human rights violations.



The influx of refugees into India is expected to rise in the coming period due to several reasons.

First is the militarization of Chin state. No military battalions were stationed in Chin state until 1988. Soon after the uprising in that year, battalions appeared in the area and by 2008 there were 14 military battalions stationed in Chin state, each with around 500 soldiers. This has resulted in serious and numerous human rights violations in Chin state including rape, torture, arbitrary arrest, forced labor, extortion, and forced recruitment.

Second, according to the new law of Military Recruitment declared by military dictator Senior General Than Swe in December 2010, every citizen of Myanmar between the ages of 18-35 must serve in the military for at least two years. Serving in the military indirectly means fighting and killing our very own people, especially for the ethnic minorities.

Third, in 2008 the cyclical bamboo flowering called “Mau Tam” caused a severe famine in Chin state. But the military did not stop hassling the people who have already been stricken by famine.

Fourth, several Chin refugees have been deported from Northeastern states of India such as Mizoram. We believe the number of refugees escaping to Delhi will only increase with time.

These are the four main forces behind the rise in the number of Burmese refugees in India. They began arriving in 1988 and now number over 11,500. Due to the forces outlined above, the refugee population from Chin state will likely rise to 20,000 by the end of 2011.

There has always been talk of the influx of Burmese refugees being the result of economic migration. Since Chins from Chin state make up the major portion of the Burmese refugee population in India, it is useful to take a look at Chin history. Our culture and geography are such that agriculture is our livelihood. Since they have a rich land, the culturally-influenced Chins have no reason to leave their land and suffer severe discrimination, assault, and harassment and to embrace “statelessness” on foreign soil solely for economic purposes.

Burma has been under the most brutal military dictatorship in the world for more than half a century and its people have been suffering since the military came into power. All refugees were denied their rights back in Burma and some were tortured to the extent that once they got on the other side of the border; they were not able to even speak about the nightmare they endured. Having been denied proper education, many refugees while still in Burma are brainwashed by the regime to not be able to recognize that their rights are being violated. According to a *Physicians for Human Rights* (PHR) report in early 2011, “Life under the Jun-

ta: Evidence of Crimes against Humanity in Burma’s Chin State”:

Of the 621 households interviewed, 92% reported at least one episode of a household member being forced to porter military supplies, sweep for landmines, be servants, build roads, and do other hard labor. The Burmese military imposed two-thirds of these forced labor demands; they also accounted for all reported rapes. Government soldiers tortured or beat ethnic Chins (reported by 15% of households), and killed and abducted civilians with impunity. One out of eight Chin households was forcibly displaced (most to find food), and one-third of all forcible conscriptions were of children under 15.

Refugees recognized by UNHCR have the option of being resettled to a third country where they can fully enjoy their rights, but even if the UNHCR is capable of resettling this ever-increasing refugee population, the process would take decades to get a satisfactory result.

India has hosted Chin refugees for over two decades, and these refugees will never forget the kindness shown to them. But it is important to note that India is neither a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or the 1967 Protocol nor does it have any domestic laws to deal with the huge refugee population that it hosts. Consequently, there are many issues affecting Chin refugees in India. In Delhi in particular, Chin refugees face severe discrimination, assault, and exploitation in their daily lives.

After one is recognized as a refugee by the UNHCR, one has to apply for a Residential Permit (RP) from the *Foreigners Regional Registration Office* (FRRO) that needs to be renewed every six months. Many Chin refugees have not been able to obtain this RP on account of the heavy fee charged. In terms of education, Chin refugees cannot apply for a spot in any government universities with their UNHCR Refugee Cards nor can the cards secure them a spot in any professional course. Chin refugees are unable to obtain a work permit and this particular factor has brought about several serious problems in our struggle to survive. Most are forced to work in the informal sector where they are exposed to all types of exploitation, discrimination, and assault without any protection. Hundreds of Burmese men have been assaulted and discriminated against in terms of wages in their workplace. Moreover, many Chin women have been harassed, assaulted, molested, and raped in their workplace. In their vulnerable situation, the Chin refugees further face a lack of support and the police remain inactive. No proper investigation is carried out nor adequate treatment provided in government hospitals.

I would now like to highlight some of the issues affecting the lives of Chin refugees in Delhi.

1. Security

On top of being refugees, Chins' different physical appearance and language barriers in caste-driven India expose us to severe discrimination and assault. The protection services provided by the UNHCR have become inadequate for this ever-increasing Chin refugee population. Several young women are in great danger by working as maids and by working at several night-shift jobs for better wages. Working in factories where Indian males usually dominate has also proven to be a threat for refugee women. Police inaction and lack of intervention in Chin refugees' legal complaints have worsened our security concerns in India. Sources from the Falam community (one of the largest communities among Chin refugees) claimed that none of the 15 police complaints lodged against Indians in the past three months has been responded to or action taken to date.

2. Livelihood

Most of us are forced to work in the informal sector where we face financial exploitation, sexual exploitation, discrimination, harassment, and assault. Being denied a work permit by the Indian government, we have only the option of working in the informal sector. But job opportunities even in this sector are rare and many Chin refugees are unemployed.

For some time, each refugee received a Subsistence Allowance from the UNHCR, but this was phased out as of the 2011 financial year. The withdrawal of this allowance and continued unemployment have forced refugees into picking up left-over or half-rotten vegetables from night markets at midnight, where they are exposed to sexual harassment and assault. The consumption of these half-rotten vegetables results in malnutrition and several other health problems including diarrhea and dysentery.

Now many school-age refugee children are being forced to work instead of studying, and they are doing hard labor with low wages, such as being an office boy, tea supplier, sweeper, dishwasher, or helper in a factory. The saddest part is that many children pick up food that has been dumped on the street and eat even the rotis that are kept on the roadside

assault victim in Delhi



for cows. Moreover, it is said that the young refugee girls are getting involved in the sex trade as they have no other way to survive. At their wit's end, some refugees even go to pawn shops to pawn their UN certificate or FRRO cards to borrow money at a very high interest rate (such as 20%). The situation is truly troubling beyond our imagination and a worse crisis is threatening us as never before.

3. Educational Issues

Education has been our major problem since we fled the country. Currently we have two study centers provided by UNHCR in our community:

- YMCA (implementing partner of the UNHCR) runs children's classes
- Don Bosco runs a youth study centre for basic English and computer classes

However, since the number of Chin refugees has been increasing drastically over the past few years, these services can no longer meet the needs of all.

The YMCA has been helping a few Chin refugee children get into government formal schools, but the poor infrastructure and severe discrimination that the children face in these schools mean parents don't want to send them to these schools.

Only a handful of Chin youth can access higher study. Refugees cannot secure a place in any central government university or professional course with their Blue Refugee Cards. Several Chin refugees have had to miss out on higher studies solely for this reason.

As the President of the *Chin Refugee Committee*, I personally would like to express my grave concern about the threats that we are facing, the danger of losing the young Chin generation to illiteracy.

4. Health Facilities

Chin refugees have been assigned by the UNHCR to approach a government hospital, the *Deen Dayal Upadhyay Hospital*, for any health problems. Medication is provided free of cost in this government hospital but no effective medical attention is given to patients. Many have lost their lives as a result. The UNHCR also has a “medical reimbursement” policy


but it takes more than six to eight months to be able to take advantage of this policy.

5. Housing

As room rents are very high, we live in the slum areas of Delhi. We can afford to rent only those buildings that need to be repaired and have been unpainted for several years. Several people share one small room with no separate kitchen where there is no proper ventilation and an unhealthy environment. We have to cook, eat, and sleep in the same place. On top of that, a single latrine is shared by around ten rooms.

These are the main issues our community is facing.

I would now like to summarize the urgent requirements of Chin refugees in India:

- 
- (a) Our community feels that being resettled to a third country is one of the best solutions to our problems, and a long-term solution. Try as we might, with our refugee status that is not even acknowledged by the Indian government, we will never be able to enjoy our rights fully in every aspect. In India, we lack job prospects, security in our daily lives, education in our community, and medical attention for our health problems.
 - (b) Education is one of the most important issues for us and this is the only investment that our community will benefit from in the future. The current support that we have for education is proving to be inadequate for the increasing refugee population and significant further assistance is required.
 - (c) Due to the difficult living conditions we are in and the poor health facilities available, many refugees have developed serious life-threatening diseases and many have lost their lives untimely and unnecessarily. Our community can facilitate some services but our limited resources cannot help the community effectively. Refugees are desperate for some help with their health problems.

I hope that this article has given you greater insight into the situation of Chin refugees living in India, and will spur you to lend us a helping hand.

Steven Ral Kap Tluang

The Health Status of Burmese Refugees in India

Burmese refugees in India are from poor families living in substandard conditions. They must rely on an insufficient health care system in a developing country that, like Burma, also ranks low by international standards. Many of the refugees come from remote areas of Burma, which are underdeveloped and have been neglected by the government for decades. Their levels of education and their economic status are extremely low, as are their general levels of health, and all asylum-seekers are prone to infectious diseases. Upon arrival in Delhi there are new facilities available to them, but they are badly insufficient.

In line with its mandate, the UNHCR provides health assistance to recognized refugees. There are, however, hundreds of unrecognized refugees. Burmese refugees are unaware that the Indian government provides for their health. A couple of NGOs partner with the UNHCR to assist Burmese refugees. Recently, however, there have been angry complaints of

corruption, discrimination and inefficiency against those NGOs. Given the fact that one health NGO has already been disallowed, the Burmese refugees' complaints should be taken seriously.

Burmese refugees are encouraged to seek medical treatment from government hospitals and dispensaries. However, they don't get the treatment they deserve. Professionally speaking, apart from long lines, difficulties with communication and discrimination, the overall standard of the healthcare is of questionable quality. Recently, a pregnant Burmese mother who is hepatitis B positive had unfortunate and as-yet-unexplained labor complications at a government-run hospital. It emerged that untrained staff forcefully pushed the pregnant woman's abdomen and that the patient had to be given 10 units of blood after labor and provided with a post-delivery emergency laparotomy.

To promote health, the Burmese community has tried to set up its own clinics. One of these is the *Yamu-*

consultation at Yamuna Clinic



na Clinic, which opened in 2002. The data collected by the clinic reveals the actual health status of Burmese refugees taking shelter in Delhi.

The clinic is free for all Burmese refugees. It is run by a Burmese physician/politician who requests donations and contributions from friends and sympathizers. This is because most NGOs are not interested in running a clinic for refugees residing in a capital city. In a question-and-answer session on Burmese-language radio, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi promised to support the clinic.

Qualified Volunteers

The question of nationality is a matter of interest because Burma is a country of many different ethnic groups. The doctor belongs to the mainstream Burmese group while the majority of the refugees come from the Chin, Kachin and Arakan states and also from the Kuki area and the Naga hills. Among Chin refugees there are at least three different dialects. Therefore the doctor needs assistants who can speak different Chin languages.

The clinic's assistants deserve particular appreciation because they, like other refugees, have to earn a living but volunteer their services free of charge. Some of them have to spend their own money to travel to the clinic. The clinic's assistants also have to be prepared to travel to the clinic at any time of day if a woman goes into labor. They are well-trained and an asset to their community. These are the right people to provide health education to this community.

In 2010 there were a total of 8,607 patients. Among these, 62.3% were female and 37.7% were male. The majority of the refugees suffer from infectious and communicable diseases, due to their low socio-economic status and poor living conditions. Many girls, women and even men have anemia and vitamin deficiencies. Many of them have big families and sometimes the entire family gets infected. Seasonal illnesses such as flu, diarrhea, allergies, shin infections, viral hepatitis A and dengue fever are common.

Significantly, ante-natal care (ANC) is common among the clinic's patients. Seeing that government hospitals are crowded and private clinics are expensive, the Yamuna clinic provides for all labor cases. Since November 2006, a total of 207 babies have been delivered at the clinic. Vaccinations (BCG, hepatitis B, DPT, OPV and ATT) are also provided for all newborn babies. But refugee women can't get the HPV vaccine for cervical cancer. The children have to pay for MMR, typhoid and measles vaccines from private centers. All these are expensive.

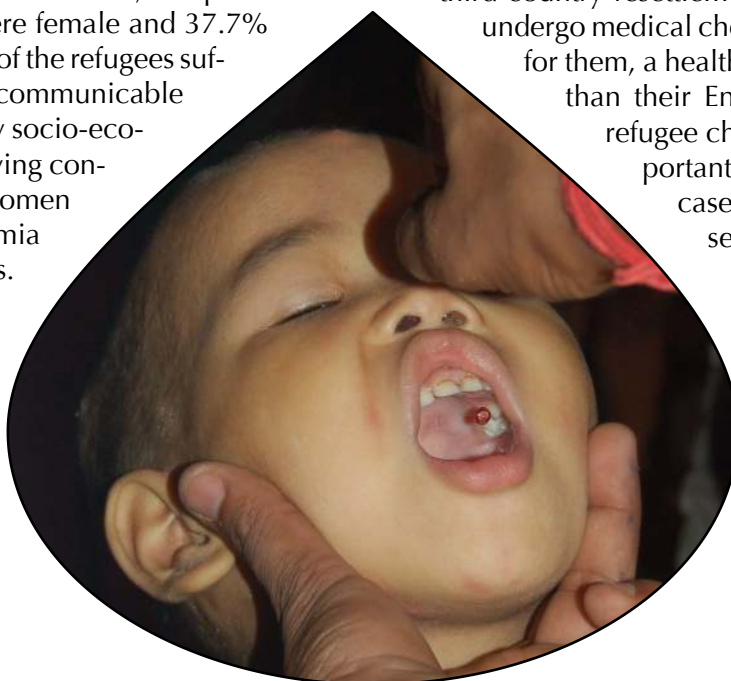
Tuberculosis (TB) is not uncommon among Burmese refugees and the morbidity rate is rising. Refugees have to pay for external laboratory tests and X-rays while regular treatment is provided free of charge by the *Yamuna Clinic*. Hepatitis B and C as well as HIV are also present among refugees. The extremely costly tests and treatments for these serious life-threatening diseases are a challenge. Some refugees have no choice other than to let the disease run its course.

Burmese refugees have to work mostly unofficially, with no health insurance, no care for occupational health hazards and no compensation. There are reports of accidental deaths.

Health education is not feasible for Burmese refugees because they have to work for many hours and have no time for education or political events. NGOs love providing workshops that are unsuitable for refugees. Though addiction and depression are common among refugees, psychological counseling is entirely unavailable to Burmese refugees.

Most Burmese refugees residing in Delhi dream of third-country resettlement. For that they have to undergo medical check-ups before leaving. So for them, a healthy body is more important than their English-language skills. For refugee children, health is more important than education. There are cases of refugees who have resettled in third countries sending donations to the clinic. From this, it can be seen that working on and contributing to healthcare benefits the community and is a good practice of politics.

Dr. Tint Swe



The Dream of Burmese Refugees in Delhi: Education

As we all know, Burma rose against its tyrants, Ne Win's "Burma Socialist Program party" regime, under the leadership of educated youths in the year 1988. The whole nation hoped "the winds of change"¹ would start blowing in Burma. But the uprising ended with several untimely deaths and thousands of arrests by the military. Thousands were forced to flee the country for their safety. The bloody coup was the catalyst for Burmese refugees pouring into neighboring countries, including India. After two decades, the number of refugees from Burma in India is believed to have exceeded 100,000². Most of them live in Mizoram state as undocumented foreigners, while more than 11,500³ are reported to be under UNHCR supervision in New Delhi, many of them holding refugee cards provided by the UNHCR. The majority of these refugees are Chin from Chin State in Burma.

As urban refugees, the Burmese in New Delhi are in an extremely vulnerable situation with no work permit and no proper legal framework to protect them. A lack of skills, poor educational background, and an inability to speak the local language or English have led all into a bleak situation. The refugees face severe discrimination as well as physical and sexual assault by locals in the workplace and at home, and this has put them in a grave situation. While struggling for survival and safety, even though they are now away from the oppressive regime, these refugees can still only dream of education.

According to a survey conducted among 3,274 Chin refugees by the *Chin Refugee Committee* (CRC) in May 2011, out of 1,311 children interviewed, only 421 are receiving some form of education. While some refugees fall directly under the Indian government, others fall under the mandate of the UNHCR New Delhi, and this includes the Burmese refugees.

Provision for Education through UNHCR

India is not a party to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees or to the 1967 Protocol. Therefore refugees are dealt with in an ad-hoc manner. India deals differently with various refugee groups. Burmese refugees cannot apply for higher studies in universities with their UNHCR provided Refugee Certificate and Temporary Residential Permit. Private universities are believed to be more accommodating in dealing with

Burmese refugees, but no Burmese refugee is able to pay the high fees of these universities.

The UNHCR provides some form of educational facilities and financial assistance for education. Every child who is recognized as a refugee by the organization is given assistance in the form of a one-time payment of 1500 INR when they start to attend a government school.

Through one of its implementation partners, the YMCA, the UNHCR runs crèches in different locations where the refugee community lives. The crèches are for children between the ages of 6 to 13. Midday meals are served in the crèche classes. Some of the children who have had some formal education in Burma are provided bridging classes, to prepare them for the India formal education set-up. After attending crèche classes for a certain period, children are encouraged and helped in getting enrolled in government schools. Students enrolled in government schools receive some assistance from the YMCA.

Another of the UNHCR's implementing partners, *Don Bosco Ashalayam* (DBA), provides English language and basic computer courses. These classes admit refugees only above the age of 13. Currently, some 150 children are registered with DBA for various courses. DBA also provides funding to refugees to take short-term vocational courses.

Other Educational Support

Apart from the UNHCR, a UK registered educational charity called *Prospect Burma* runs its *English Language Training School* in the community where English and basic computer courses are provided. The *Prospect Burma* school admits students above the age of 16. Approximately 70 students are currently enrolled for the 2010-2011 academic year.

Indian Private Schools

India has always been considered a hub of qualified young people in several professional fields. For Burmese students in particular, the Indian education system is considered far better than that in Burma.

Indian secondary education is divided in two components: public school and private school education. Private schools are typically the best form of education in India. Admission to such schools is very competitive and while the facilities are good, the fees for these institutions are very high. Almost all the Indian upper class, upper-middle class, and middle class send their children to such private institutions. There are some private institutions, however, where quality is dependent on financial contributions. Such private institutions also charge equally high fees but they do not limit their student intakes and do not pay much attention to the education their students are receiving.

James Fanai, a refugee who has been teaching Burmese children for many years through an informal school that he runs, said that children often complain about not receiving proper instructions from their teachers in private schools. He also said, "Some parents actually took their children out of the private schools and admitted them to my informal school. But it did not surprise me because there are many private institutions that only care about money. The children barely learn at these institutions."

There are a handful of Burmese children studying in such private schools. They depend financially on their relatives and family members who have been resettled in third countries. But the majority of refugees are struggling to survive, by working in the informal sector amid various kinds of discrimination. And although every parent dreams of sending their children to the best possible institution, reality does not permit them to do so.

Indian Government Schools

UNHCR New Delhi has made it mandatory for refugee children to attend government schools. This policy does not address the problems refugee children face in terms of education.

In India, government schools are considered to be of very low standard. In its annual report on the status of Education 2008 (ASER)⁴, the Indian NGO *PRATHAM* reported that only about 50% of children studying in government schools in Fifth Standard can read a Second Standard text and even fewer can solve simple division sums. But since education in government schools is free, almost all children of the lower-middle class and financially disadvantaged class attend government schools. Hindi is used as the medium of teaching in government schools, as most children who attend are Hindu speakers. But Burmese refugee children do not speak, read, or write Hindi and thus face problems.

For refugee children, the lack of good facilities, the poor standard of teaching, and the inability to cope with the language are not the only problems they face in government schools. They are exposed to bullying, harassment, assaults, and taunts by their classmates. Many children have complained of harassment where they are made to sit on the verandah instead of joining other local children in the classroom.

Eight-year-old Solomon was admitted to a government school in C-1, Janakpuri, Delhi area in 2010 and he was studying in Class-II when he refused to continue going to school in May 2011. His mother, Then Tly Khyhon, added, "Right from the time he started going to school, he would often come back home crying since the local boys from the school would beat him up most of the time. But in May 2011, he was beaten in the playground by the big boys, since then he has refused to go to school. I tried hard to persuade him but he gets aggressive whenever I tell him to go to school." Solomon's family was recognized as refugees in 2009. During the interview with Solomon, one of the children assaulted at his school said, "Indian boys from the school would beat me all the time. They tore my shirt sleeve also. When I was in Class-I, I had many Burmese friends but my friends stopped coming to school when I reached Class-II. In Class-II, big boys from Class-V, beat me while I was playing. I was bleeding".

Sai Lian, Mi Nge, Su Su, and Benjamin, who were all enrolled at a government school in the beginning of the year 2011, always got drenched on their way to school. One of their school-mates staying close by the school would wait up and throw water on them and they would sit soaking wet in the class. This throwing water on them continued for many days and finally these children refused to go to school. Their parents cannot argue with the young culprit as everyone in the Burmese refugee community knows that arguing with locals would end up in them being beaten, whatever the incident is.

Higher Education

Burmese refugees cannot apply to pursue higher education at universities with their UNHCR Certificate and the Temporary Residential Permit that is issued by the *Foreigners Regional Registration Office* (FRRO). Some refugees, however, have managed to get admission to some of the open universities.

Prospect Burma and *Open Society Institute* provide partial scholarships to selected students for higher studies in India. Usually about 30 students⁵ a year manage to enroll in an *Open University* course. In these distance-learning courses, there are no regular

classes. By the end of each academic year, the number of students who get through to the next year falls to one fourth of the initial number of students enrolled. The education system in Burma has suffered much at the hands of the regime and the majority of students who get the opportunity for higher education in India have found it extremely difficult to cope with studies as *Open Universities* do not provide systematic teaching and learning facilities. In addition, switching from learning English as a subject to learning every subject in English is a very challenging situation for the students.

Current Situation

The YMCA Vikaspuri Branch implemented the UNHCR's new policy by assisting refugee children to get admitted to government schools until June 2011, after which they stopped offering assistance services. But the YMCA had implemented this policy despite complaints from students and their parents about harassment and physical assault at these schools. Most Burmese refugee children are beaten and harassed by their local classmates while teachers stand by and watch. The children started to refuse to attend these schools, and parents have raised this concern in the past. In desperation, the Chin community sent letters expressing their concerns to the UNHCR in India and to the Head Office in Geneva in July 2011. Subsequently, the Chin community decided to boycott YMCA and its services to show their dissatisfaction with the way it functions in the community.

This boycotting deeply reflects the desire of Burmese people, students, and parents to have access to education. The grave financial situation pushing the

Burmese community to even consider government schools as an option has not made access to education possible and easy.

The UNHCR, in its "2011 UNHCR Planning Figures for India", predicted that by the end of 2011 the number of refugees from Burma in Delhi could reach up to 16,300. The situation looks extremely dim especially with regards to education.

Presently, the community has to depend on informal education and study centers run by community-based associations or groups, *Prospect Burma English School* and *Don Bosco*. These existing institutions can accommodate only about 500 children in total. Most of these study centers are English language-based study centers with no grading system. All of the community-run study centers lack donors. With extremely limited resources, sustainability is a problem all the centers must tackle. These study centers and institutions are the only source of education that Burmese refugees in India can access in the current situation.

Conclusion

During the Saffron Revolution in 2007, monks were forced to push beyond their religious boundaries and lead Burma's second uprising. Most educated youth were either arrested or forced to flee tyranny. It is difficult to imagine another revolution in this context. The big question for everyone is whether the Burmese refugees in exile can produce the necessary number of educated individuals to rebuild the nation. Though everyone is aware of the real situation and the regime's dubious new policies, one must also admit the fact that a transition is taking place in Burma. And Burma is



School at YMCA

now in dire need of educated citizens who will take up their duty of leading the masses against the veiled military government. It is evident that most of the educated middle class youth inside Burma today are military-oriented. An educated middle class that would take part in the nation's genuine rebuilding process must come largely from the exile population.

In this context, responsible citizens of this globalized world must support genuine democracy in Burma by extending more timely help to Burmese in exile, including a focus on education.

Rosalinn Zahau

Footnotes

- 1 *British Prime Minister Mac Milan's speech in Africa in 1960*
- 2 *Human Rights Watch 2009 report "We are like Forgotten people: Unsafe in Burma, Unprotected in India"*
- 3 *UNHCR report "2011 UNHCR Planning Figures for India"*
- 4 *PRATHAM's ASER 2008-2009 Education annual assessment report*
- 5 *The figure is estimated from the Chin Student Union-Delhi record and the number of students applying for Prospect Burma and Open Society Institute Scholarships every year.*

Hopes of Better Lives: The Problems and Activities for Refugee Women in Mizoram

The present situation has been in existence for more than 23 years, and still we cannot be free of fear no matter how much we want to be. We left our beloved motherland with hopes of better lives in Mizoram, India, for many reasons. But as refugees or illegal migrants we are only unwelcome guests in the eyes of the local Mizo population.

In Mizoram, there are more than 110,000 refugees from Burma, most of whom migrated due to the repression of religious freedoms. The other main reasons for migration are the economic crisis; violations of economic, social and culture rights, such as the levying of higher taxes; serious violations of civil and political rights, such as forced labor with the military; and the diminishing of traditional livelihoods due to government policies. Under the oppressive military-supported regime, the people of Burma are not free from fear in their own country.

We earned our livelihoods there in sweat and tears, under army control, but what we received was just a small amount, which met only our day-to-day needs.

In Mizoram, we don't enjoy the same legal system as citizens in other countries. Its government doesn't provide us with a health care scheme but we can get aid from government-run and private hospitals and clinics if we have enough money.

Some Burmese refugees have chronic diseases such as hepatitis or HIV/AIDS. Fortunately, they get support from concerned NGOs.

In the field of education, we cannot attend regular classes in Mizo schools because schools don't want to admit Burmese refugee students due to their lack of English-language skills and qualifications. Private education is very expensive for poor refugees. Therefore, most parents do not send their children to school, instead hoping that the situation in Burma will soon improve and, after their return, their children can continue their education in Burma. Parents also have to rely on additional income generated by their children to support their families, which results in a high school-dropout rate and incomplete education.

In Mizoram, we earn our living from jobs that require no qualifications: labor and domestic work, handloom weaving, crop cultivation and woodcutting in fields and forests. Some refugees work as goldsmiths, carpenters and vendors. We take any kind of job we can get to survive, even if it's illegal.

As Burmese citizens we face discrimination everywhere in Mizoram. Even when we work for the community and do good business and work hard, we don't receive recognition for it from the locals. We therefore face numerous problems, including irregular and unpaid wages. Nor can we visit medical facilities when we are ill or have work-related injuries.

Refugee Women in Need

The situation is particularly difficult for women, because we live in a male-dominated society, both

What refugee life is like in Mizoram

"In Mizoram, a refugee family's income is between Rs. 4,000 and Rs. 10,000 and rent ranges from Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 7,000 per month. Food is much more expensive these days, as can be seen from the Indian government's decision to increase the salaries of public employees because of rising daily costs. Between two and seven refugees have to live on one person's income, and the cost of food for one person is at least Rs. 2,000 because of increasing prices.

So it is very difficult to survive in India and, in economic terms, it isn't actually better than living in Burma itself."

among the Burmese and the Mizos. Most of our people think that we, as women, are not protected by laws and regulations because we are foreigners and refugees or illegal migrants. Violence against women and girls is nothing new in Burma; it has existed since the days of our ancestors. Women and children are discriminated against even today. There have been cases of deaths caused by violence in the victims' homes, but these often go unreported. Non-lethal violence is often not seen as a crime, either by the community at large or by the perpetrator. The victims of such violence lack access to legal aid, and they lack the necessary legal awareness. Furthermore, public opinions on women pursuing legal cases or fighting legal battles are negative, and, as a result, these women are often stigmatized. Such conditions have led women to believe that subjugation is their rightful condition.

Under the existing customary law, women don't have property rights, and this often means that in cases of violence they don't have a place to escape to, especially illegal migrant women who don't own property.

There have been few cases of women seeking help from people they know (such as neighbors or the people from whom they rent houses), for a variety of reasons including a lack of language skills, intimidation or an inferiority complex. There is no psychosocial support for women in such situations. Even if the Burmese women (who in Mizoram are mainly from the Chin ethnic group) return to their ancestral homes, their families refuse to support them. On the other hand, women who have survived violence are often those who lack economic empowerment and a secure livelihood. Thus women who escape violent households or partners often end up in illegal or undignified occupations, such as selling alcohol or drugs or working in the

sex trade. Although they are the victims, they tend to blame themselves for the violence committed against them.

We at the Grass-root Development Network (GDN) have been mobilizing community-based organizations such as the Mizo Women's Network (MHIP), the

Young Mizo Association (YMA), the Mizo Student Association (MZP) and stakeholders in refugee women's issues in Mizoram. Our goals are the better participation of refugees in solving their own problems; supporting democracy in Burma; supporting anti-corruption measures; and raising awareness of universal human rights. We also provide women's rights training and basic human rights training, and seek to build the capacity for youth training; raise awareness of women's rights; spread information on domestic violence to women; and advocate basic human rights and the rights of children among refugees and local grassroots peoples.

We also run a small shelter and provide for the basic needs of female victims of violence. We successfully sought aid for mothers and children, including nutrition, vitamins and daycare for refugee women's babies, from *Anganwadi*, an Indian government mother-and-child/daycare center; check-ups and medicines from government-run sub-centers; and, up until 2010, free legal aid from government providers. Since 2011, it has not been possible to get free legal aid for refugee women due to cases of the latter's behavior towards government legal aid providers, however we have been working with the *Human Rights Law Network* to provide free legal aid to refugee women. We have also secured jobs for female survivors from Burma who GDN has been taking care of. To help with cases where domestic violence has been an issue, we established a small pig farm where these women are able to work.

Among these neglected refugee issues, however, GDN wants to focus especially on promoting the capacity for refugees and on economic empowerment as a means of restoring dignity to their lives. We also see the need to create a women's center as well as offer counseling in the town of Aizawl, where we could

organize meetings at which women could share the problems they face in their daily lives. This could also be used to share information about rights, responsibilities and mental health, along with positive advice regarding the women's workplaces, homes and community, and on living in other communities and countries.

If we can get support, we intend to provide livelihood options to women through pig farming. This is based on the understanding that there is very little legal or other kinds of protection available to women who have fled a life of violence, insecurity and no employment options. In order to work on a farm of this kind, women don't need to be educated and could look after the pigs from their homes, while also caring for their children. Pig farms have been chosen as a livelihood option because pork is a staple food for much of the Mizoram population, and this should make them prof-

itable ventures in the long term. This project is intended to run for an initial period of three years, after which the women are expected to become self-sufficient, having acquired the skills necessary to run the farm, earn money and set up pig farms of their own without the support of the *Grassroot Development Network*.

We settled in Mizoram many years ago and don't have anywhere to return to in Burma. Since we don't enjoy citizen's rights in Burma and, at the same time, are unable to take Indian citizenship, we have entirely lost our identity.

But we still have hopes of a better life.

Lalthanzami

“The Struggle Will Continue”

An interview with Soe Myint, editor-in-chief of *Mizzima News*, a Burmese news agency based in New Delhi and Chiang Mai.

This summer, *Mizzima News* celebrated its 13th year of existence. Looking back, what would you say was your biggest mistake and what was your best decision?

I don't think *Mizzima* has a “biggest mistake” or “best decision” made during the 13-year-journey. *Mizzima* is proud of what it is today, despite the challenges. It is a part of ongoing struggle for betterment.

Do you think Burmese media can learn from media in other countries that have gone through a transition to democracy? Or is the Burmese case in some way unique?

Mizzima and other Burmese media are definitely able to learn from the experiences of other countries.

***Mizzima News* is based in Delhi, but it also operates an office in Chiang Mai. How is the work of Burmese media in India different from that Thailand?**

There is no significant difference between the Burmese media in India and Thailand because whatever the place and situation they operate in, they are operating outside of Burma. For *Mizzima*, we have our

head office in India. Naturally, having offices in two different places, in Burma's east and west neighbouring countries, we have the upper hand in terms of our media coverage compared with our competitors.

In the past decades, the Indian government has abandoned its engagement for democracy in Burma in favour of its own strategic and economic interests. But how does the Indian population perceive *Mizzima* and the values you fight for?

I cannot say about the Indian population because it is too vast for a Burmese media organization like *Mizzima*. Most of the Indian population will never have heard about *Mizzima* at all. But there are some readers, supporters and friends (very, very few in number) in places like New Delhi, Kolkata, or India's northeastern states who are aware of *Mizzima*'s work and I think they appreciate *Mizzima* providing Burma-related news for them.

India ranks in the top 10 online readership of the *Mizzima* English website at present. *Mizzima* is not a “grass-roots organization” and we are pretty sure we can reach out to at least a section of Indian policy makers.

India is home to tens of thousands of refugees from Burma who often live under appalling conditions. Your office is located in immediate vicinity of their quarters in Delhi. How does being so close to the refugee community influence your work?

Being close to the refugee community and with many of our staff being refugees (I myself am a refugee), *Mizzima* sees the plight of the Burmese refugees and exiles in Delhi.

You recruit much of your staff from refugees who often perceive Delhi only as a waiting room for resettlement into third countries. Have you experienced a loss of skilled people in some kind of "brain drain"?

We have encountered this trend for the last five years in our office in Delhi and now *Mizzima* is organized to face this as a normal part of our operations – recruit, train, and offer a job until someone leaves. We are happy if they can learn something at *Mizzima* and if they can utilize their experiences and training in their "third country".

Mizzima has a core group who do not leave for resettlement. People come and go but *Mizzima* still plays an important role among the exile media, possibly the best. It proves *Mizzima's* strength in terms of in-house training and institutionalization.

How would you describe the feelings of the younger generation inside Burma? Do they still understand the reasons why people like you dedicate their lives for free media? Or would you confirm what many people observe, that young Burmese are increasingly complacent about politics and merely care about career, money and shopping malls?

There are some youth who do not understand what the elders did and fought and continue to fight for but there are many youth (and many times, I am impressed with their quality of how they view life) who will carry the torch of the struggle for a larger vision of freedom, justice and peace. It is also up to the elder generation to help them see what the struggle is for. Youth today are generally much more aware of what is happening around their lives compared with the old days when we were brought up, due to information technology and their desire to know.

Do you think that an uprising like in the Arab countries is possible in Burma?

An "Arab Spring" is possible. Thanks to the better flow of information, today the younger generation is more aware of politics. They may not be visible or wear a party logo or stand out in forums, as is natural, but their awareness and participation is amazing. If you look at Aung San Suu Kyi's speeches and those that gather there, most of those who come are young people. This is quite impressive.



Mizzima's office

Have you ever had the opportunity to meet a representative of the Burmese regime in person? What do they think about your work, do they understand why you do this?

No. I have not had a chance to meet a representative of the Burmese regime for *Mizzima* work or for politics. I think the Burmese regime (previous and present), sees *Mizzima* as a challenge to their establishment. But the government reads *Mizzima* and monitors *Mizzima* news.

What is the biggest challenge for Burmese independent media after the 2010 elections?

As in the past, Burmese independent media will have to continue to fight for its rightful place in Burma.

The example of former communist countries has often revealed that after a regime change many established institutions inside the country survived by swiftly adapting to the new era, while long-standing pro-democracy forces from outside fail to gain a foothold back in the country. How do you see the chances and the role of Burmese exile media in a future democratic and free Burma? And what is their asset for the period of transition?

Those who struggle (either inside or outside) have their own roles in the nation-rebuilding of Burma, but they may have different assets and opportunities as well as weaknesses and challenges. We have our own networks inside the country.

What are *Mizzima*'s future plans? Do you think your work could one day undergo a radical change and how are you preparing for it?

I do not agree with some international media when they use the word "flee" or "exile" when we, the 1988 generation, left Burma after the military coup in 1988. I, like many thousands of Burmese students and youth, "left" (not "fled") the country with one single objective of going back to fight against the dictatorship. I never aimed to resettle outside the country.

The reason I am outside the country up until now is because my struggle continues. For *Mizzima* as well, it was established as a part of ongoing struggle and one day it will surely be inside Burma. Since the end of 2006, *Mizzima* has steadily worked to penetrate into Burma and today, we are able to broadcast live through our websites any significant event or incident inside Burma. If we have more financial resources, *Mizzima* could do 24-hour satellite TV broadcast into Burma. The 2007 Saffron Revolution, 2008 Constitutional Referendum, 2008 Cyclone Nargis, and 2010 Elections were our major live web broadcasts for *Mizzima* during the past five years.

We are ready to work inside Burma. The question is "the right time". We will decide that "right time" ourselves. The struggle will continue either inside or outside Burma.

Thank you for this interview!

Find *Mizzima* News at www.mizzima.com.



About Khonumthung News Group

The *Khonumthung News Group* (KNG) is an independent news agency covering Chin and Burma related issues in English and Burmese. It represents all Chin news groups inside and outside of Burma, and it is the only one operating in the Indo-Myanmar border using three languages.

Khonumthung is the name of the highest mountain in Kanpalet Township, Southern Chin State, North Western Burma. It is approximately 10,000 feet above sea level and during the British occupation it was called Mt. Victoria.

KNG is a member of *Burma News International* (BNI), created by exiled Burmese journalists and news agencies in 2003 to counter the restrictions of the Press Security Act of Burma. In its short tenure, *Khonumthung News Group* has raised global awareness of the trials and tribulations faced by the Burmese, and in particular the Chin people, under oppressive military rule. With its work, *Khonumthung News Group* has played a role in helping solve the problems plaguing Burma.

websites: www.khonumthung.org and www.khonumthungburmese.org

Cross-Border News Reporting from Mizoram

Background

When General Ne Win came to power, freedom of the press was curbed for all media channels. Newspapers, journals, radios, and television have been controlled by the ruling government since 1962. People in the border areas have not been able to access current news and information both national and international for over 50 years. Given this situation, a Chin youth group established *Khonumthung News Group* on 7 March 2002 to inform Chin people in western Burma.

Until now, the Burmese regime has not provided sufficient means of communication, such as telephone and Internet, in the Indo-Myanmar border area and the roads are in a terrible state. Consequently, most people in remote areas have no knowledge of politics, and traffic accidents occur frequently in Chin State, especially during monsoon season. People in the border area are simply struggling for survival; the current military-backed government has clearly ignored human rights and does not believe in democracy.

The *Khonumthung News Group* focuses on the situation of the Chin people in its print and online media every day, to raise awareness among the international community. In 2008, a report on forced labour and portering helped bring a temporary ban on these two practices at the behest of U Aung Ko, Minister of Religious Affairs in April of that year to improve the country's public image. However, military personnel continue their anti-democratic practices.

Khonumthung News believes that the crisis in the political, economic, and social sectors under the regime can be solved if the people get proper information on democracy and political reforms and will then fight for their freedom and self-determination. To involve people in the restoration of democracy, the News Group will have to take on many responsibilities and have good relationship with people, educating them in various fields.

The work of *Khonumthung News* is guided by the following objectives:

- (a) The improvement of professional journalistic skills among KNG staff, and reliability and better operation of KNG.
- (b) To produce more accurate, balanced, and reliable information regarding the Chin people and their land to the global community and inside Burma.
- (c) To boost the cooperation of Chin people in the democratic movement for peace and freedom in Burma.

Present Work

A monthly newsletter in Burmese and English language versions are distributed to Chin people inside Burma and the border areas, to those who cannot access telephone and Internet communications. In total, 500 copies for remote areas and 300 copies for Mizoram border areas are distributed. In addition, daily

current news is published on websites for international news readers. *Khonumthung News* receives feedback from readers weekly or monthly. What is more, some people in Chin state inform us, by telephone or email, of current news or events there, so that the News Group can inform the international community.

Since *Khonumthung News* is not registered with the Indian authorities, however, this newsletter cannot be distributed widely or openly in Mizoram (India). For security reasons, it is also difficult to distribute it inside Burma. And due to limited funding, it cannot be printed in color.

The online publication was started in 2002 in Burmese, and in 2004 a website in English was launched with the help of the *Open Society Institute* (OSI). In 2009, the Burmese website was revamped, so that *Khonumthung* currently has two websites. There are also plans to build another website in Chin language to have more news, feature articles, and interviews when a separate budget can be secured. The Burmese site was attacked and hacked twice in 2010 (during Burma's election) and in February 2011. All

data was lost, and now only the data from March 2011 onward exists.

Here, too, *Khonumthung News* has to face several challenges: As the news group has no expert in websites and is not able to hire outside the local community, it sometimes faces difficulties in updating or changing content and video news in time. Furthermore, the bad technical conditions in Aizawl often cause problems to access the website and update content.

Initially, two sub-offices were set up inside Burma, in Kalemyo, Sagaing division and Hakha town, Chin state in 2009, and later another sub-office was opened by two reporters in Falam township. We can now access more news from those areas and can penetrate other locations through our active reporters and some stringers inside Burma. Problems like insufficient funding and equipment, however, limit the work of these offices and rule out the expansion to other Chin townships.

Sangtea

Thanks

We would like to thank the authors of the articles and the photos, the volunteer translators and editors, and those in India, the Czech Republic and other places who have supported our project and made this work a rewarding experience.

Burma Center Prague

About the Publication

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Christoph Amthor is a co-founder of *Burma Center Prague* and has been actively involved in planning and coordinating the organization's activities in India.

last free elections in Burma, in 1990, and a member of Aung San Suu Kyi's party *National League for Democracy*, NLD. His political engagement for democracy has forced him to leave the country.

Jaromír Marek

Jaromír Marek is a foreign correspondent for the Czech public radio. He took part in *Burma Center Prague's* media mentorship program in 2010 in Delhi.

Rosalinn Zahau

Rosalinn Zahau is a Chin refugee student living in Delhi. She is currently pursuing a Bachelor's of Law Degree at *Delhi University*. She has been actively involved in *Chin Student Union* (Delhi) activities.

Steven Ral Kap Tluang

Steven Ral Kap Tluang is the outgoing President of the *Chin Refugee Committee* in New Delhi. The CRC is a community-based social organization founded in 1996 by Chin refugees in New Delhi. The main objective is to serve the Chin refugees in New Delhi who are in need of protection and aid for survival, and to raise awareness among the international community of the situation of the Chin refugees.

Lalthanzami

Lalthanzami was born in a small village in Chin State, Burma. During the 1988 protests she, together with others, formed the *Burma Democratic Party* and became its secretary. Because of these activities, she had to flee to India in 1993 where she experienced the hardship of refugee life at the border. In 2008, she founded the *Grassroots Development Network*, a non-profit organization that seeks to assist and empower refugee women from Burma.

Dr. Tint Swe

Dr. Tint Swe is the head of the *Yamuna Clinic* that is operated for the Burmese community in Delhi, India. As a medical doctor he provides free services to refugees several days a week. He is also an elected Member of Parliament of the

Sangtea

Sangtea is an editor at the *Khonumthung News Group* in Aizawl, Mizoram.

Key Points

- More attention should be focused on India's role in Burma's political future
- Burmese refugees in India need better protection and access to healthcare and education
- Grassroots and self-support groups are crucial for identifying the needs of Burmese refugees in India and distributing help
- The UNHCR's efforts for the Burmese in India are important, but need to be supplemented by efforts from other actors
- An independent and professional Burmese media is essential for Burma's transition
- Burmese civil society activities in India are an important investment in democracy and society inside Burma

TRANSITION
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic



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