

Rough roads and rivers to refugees

The following account is based on the writer's blog entry for Sept. 3, 2009. See nathaninthailand.blogspot.com. The blog, which also includes pictures, described his recent trip to the Ban Mae Surin camp. This article is from the "Edifying the Body" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's Web site, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of Sept. 19-20, 2009.

By Nathan Kimmons

CHIANG MAI, Thailand—There are currently about 140,000 Burmese people living in 10 refugee camps in Thailand near the Thai-Myanmar (Burma) border. There are another estimated two million Burmese living in Thailand (for a large part illegally) integrated into the Thai economy.

So why are there Burmese refugees in Thailand in the first place?

Previously, Burma was governed mostly by a loose coalition of independent states. In the mid-1980s the current military-junta government came to power. The transition was "less than peaceful," to put it lightly. Thus the nation of Myanmar was formed.

The UN has condemned their actions with trade sanctions, etc., but that's about it. There is still an active resistance within the country of local militias (especially in the northern and eastern areas). But, with the support of China, North Korea and Russia, the Myanmar government stays well armed and funded to crush any resistance. When conflict breaks out, civilians often feel the brunt of the pain. Local villages are destroyed, women raped, men forced to be porters, or both sometimes used as human minesweepers.

I'm sure you get the idea.

So since the early 1990s, with the help of the U.N. and various non-governmental organizations, refugee camps have been established and maintained in Thailand for about 20 years. Some refugees have been there for upwards of 20 years. Children have been born and raised there and known nothing else.



Their options are limited: Wait for Burma to be safe to return to, or immigrate to another country (only the lucky few are selected to do this).

So anyway, that's a little Southeastern Asian anthropology for ya! My foundation helps out in a small way with these camps, especially with the Church of God brethren. We visit, bring food, etc.

Here are a few shots and such from our recent trip to the Ban Mae Surin camp.

(Our plan was to visit two different camps, but, due to impassable road conditions at the first camp, we could make only one. The one we didn't go to was the one I blogged about last year.)

We were advised not to take our truck to the camp because we might get stuck. (Good advice on hindsight.) So we hired a truck with the local militia to take us in. I'm firmly convinced this truck could go anywhere, so I dubbed it "the white goat."

The pavement was short-lived. It's rainy season in Thailand right now, which means it rains a lot. But minor streams flooding the road are no reason not to keep trekkin' on.

Then we came to a river flowing across the road. Our driver was seriously thinking about driving across it, but thankfully decided against it. We went over a bamboo bridge on foot and walked the rest of the way. The walk wasn't bad, about an hour or so.



Once inside the camp, we had to cross the same river five times on this same type of bridges to get to the right section.

The ride back was exactly like the ride there except backwards, of course. When we got back to the pavement, we hit a sharp spot and busted a tire. Leave it to those nice smooth paved roads to screw everything up. I think these guys had changed a tire or two in their day, though.

Well, that about covers the trip. Please pray for these people that their country can be stabilized soon, where they can return safely home.