

# The Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project

A newsletter to our supporters – February 2008



*Dear Friends,*

*The ET-MSEP is now beginning its fifth year. Many of you have supported us generously – both with donations and enthusiastic good wishes as well as genuine concern for the Burmese people. Knowing that you might like to know more about what you have been supporting, we are sending this update on our project and on the situation of the Burmese migrant schools in Mae Sot, Thailand.*

## WHAT'S NEW IN MAE SOT?

Last month I traveled to Thailand for three weeks to review both our project and the situation of migrant schools and to renew friendships with our partners. My trip was self-funded with the help of a much appreciated subsidy from the Professional Development Fund at Champlain College.

The events that unfolded on the streets of Rangoon and other Burmese cities in September reawakened the interest of the world in the fate of the Burmese people. Many have asked me how the situation there affected Burmese people in Thailand. In response, I would say that among the activists we know in Mae Sot, the sight of thousands of monks demonstrating has brought renewed hope that it is just a matter of time before the SPDC, the military regime, falls. At the same time, for many Karen ethnic people, the struggle for identity and self-determination simply goes on as it has for decades, with few signs of any kind of relief, and for many migrant workers, hardship is simply a way of life.

In Mae Sot we work with an organization called the Burmese Migrant Workers Education Committee (see [www.BMWEC.org](http://www.BMWEC.org)) that now oversees 35 migrant schools in Mae Sot including a number of IDP schools in Karen State in Burma. During my visit, I discovered that enrollments in all of the Mae Sot schools have ballooned – going from 30 or 40 children in a small school in 2003 to 100-200 in the current year. The largest and best funded school, Hsa Thoo Lei, grew from about 130 children (at least half boarding orphans or unaccompanied youth) to 450 presently. The Burmese people are still leaving their country in large numbers, a response to the insupportable economic and political situation there. Thus demands on school facilities are clearly stretched. In addition, the children are growing up. The need for higher levels of education, teaching materials and expertise presents a constant challenge, especially in a situation where the best teachers are also the best candidates for resettlement to refugee-receiving countries such as Canada and the United States. Resettlement is proving to be a complex and problematic issue for the Burmese community in Thailand. Many yearn for the stability and hope that resettlement can bring

while feeling deeply ambivalent about the morality of leaving their compatriots behind.

The need for on-going funding to pay rents and teacher salaries (a modest 2500 baht – or about \$80 – a month) is being met by a number of large organizations and donors. Our project is too small to provide operational funding for our partners. However, with our approximately \$6000 a year of direct funding to schools, we are able to provide many extras: to supplement salaries on occasion, to provide lunch programs and teaching materials for poor schools, and to help fund transportation and extra-curricular enrichment activities such as participation in soccer tournaments or celebrations of special events. Transportation represents the largest single cost for all schools, more than monthly rent or teacher salaries.

Among the positive developments I observed during my time in Mae Sot, were the following:

- increasing collaboration between migrant schools and the Thai Ministry of Education;
- more curriculum development, including the teaching of Thai in most schools;
- more teacher training, provided largely by *World Education*;
- greater interest in developing vocational education alternatives [not yet a reality] for children destined otherwise to become migrant laborers like their parents;
- increased security for teachers in migrant schools, who in January were issued identity cards that should protect them from deportation when accosted by immigration police on the streets;
- more cooperation among schools, largely through the efforts of the BMWEC, including efforts to disburse funding more equitably so that all schools benefit from donor support.

## PROJECT DEVELOPMENTS



*Hsa Mu Htaw children at lunchtime*

In 2006-2007, ET-MSEP sent four volunteers to Mae Sot. They provided English enrichment activities in six migrant schools each of which has a unique character and set of problems. At one extreme, Hsa Thoo Lei, the so-called “rich school” in this network, has two large, solid buildings built by European funders on land purchased by a Canadian. This school has a large orphanage with small dormitory rooms that seem luxurious by migrant school standards. At the other extreme is Hsa Mu Htaw, a school with only the most minimal walls and

dividers between “classrooms”, few teachers and little in terms of black boards and materials. Its 90 students come from families working on plantations, even poorer than factory workers, who lack basic necessities of life (blankets for chilly nights, clean water, etc.). We made a special effort this year to help this school.



A Hsa Mu Htaw classroom

A big success of the year is the decision of Kristyne Houbraken (volunteer) to stay on with the project in Mae Sot for the remainder of the school year and to return next year as well. Kristyne’s knowledge, dedication and enthusiasm will be a great help both

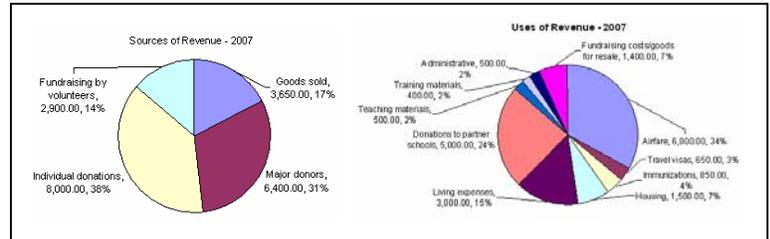
to the schools and to our new volunteers when they arrive in Mae Sot. In addition, one of our first volunteers, Nisha Toomey, returned to Mae Sot in 2006 to work at Umphiem Refugee Camp, an assignment that will finish this-coming May. Another, Barbara Rowell (also a member of our Project Committee) will return this year for a second stint of volunteer work. The perennial questions in Mae Sot are: “Will you forget us? Will you come back?” Because our partners know that we will not forget and that we will come back, we have earned their confidence and respect. Our project remains the only one in Mae Sot that consistently sends volunteers to schools for extended periods (six months), a commitment that our partners deeply appreciate in an environment where volunteers often see volunteering as an incidental part of their travel plans, undertaken with only minimal, short-term commitment. For us, the on-going challenge is to find qualified young people who are willing to make the commitment the project requires.



Kristyne at work

In terms of our ability to assist schools financially this year, special thanks goes to the Bishop’s University Resident Assistants who organized a week-long series of fundraisers in November. Their imagination, dedication and organizational

skills netted \$2600. \$600 of this money was used to purchase teaching materials (e.g., readers and instructional manuals) to be given to schools in need. The rest was given directly to partners Hsa Mu Htaw, BHSOH and to the BMWEC which will disburse it to a number of very poor rural schools for children for whom subsistence is most problematic. This large donation was on top of our usual assistance to schools (approximately \$1000 each). In addition, through us, former volunteers have continued to make their own donations to schools.



As we begin a new year, we continue to look for new sources of funding. We lost our annual \$2000 grant from the Québec Minister of International Relations this year because of changed government priorities. Fortunately a new donor has come on board to make up for that loss. In the coming months we will host a number of sales of Thai and Burmese goods, a Chinese Checkers Tournament and a “Midlife Crisis” gig at the Gold Lion Pub in Lennoxville to raise funds. We are always happy to hear new suggestions for fundraising ideas and opportunities.

### IS IT TIME TO CHANGE OUR NAME?

In our evolution as a project, we have considered changing our name. Our original conception, to partner our community in the Townships with a refugee-migrant community on the other side of the world, remains very important to us. Yet “*Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project*” is a bit unwieldy as a project name, especially when talking to Burmese partners in Mae Sot who do not know to what “Eastern Townships” refers. We have considered alternatives such as **CAN-BE**, with a subtitle such as “Canadian Youth for Burmese Migrant Education”, or simply a shortened version of our current name: “The Canada - Mae Sot Education Project”. Please let us know if you have suggestions.

For now, on behalf of the ET-MSEP Committee, our volunteers and our Burmese partners in Thailand, deepest thanks,

Mary Purkey  
Project Coordinator

The *Eastern Townships – Mae Sot Education Project* continues to be guided by a committee composed of faculty from Bishop’s University and Champlain College as well as several members of the Lennoxville community: Carinne Bevan, Derek Heatherington, Rina Kampeas, Lissa McRae, Mary Purkey, Marjorie Retzleff, Barbara Rowell, Stephen Sheeran.

### Would you like a speaker?

If you would like one of our volunteers or committee members to give a talk to your community or school group about either our project or the situation of the Burmese people, please contact us c/o Mary Purkey at [mpurkey@crc-lennox.qc.ca](mailto:mpurkey@crc-lennox.qc.ca) or at (819) 564-3666, ext. 621.

### How you can help

Contributions to the project are always welcome, and tax receipts will be issued. Donations may be made to either the Champlain College Foundation (specify Mae Sot Education Project) or to the Bishop’s University Foundation (specify Mae Sot Education Project) c/o Mary Purkey, Box 67, Champlain College, Sherbrooke, Québec, Canada J1M 2A1