



Saturday February 23, 2008

Greetings everyone!

This is the second letter I am writing from Thailand during our journey. We are doing well. We celebrated my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday on Friday. Tim seems to be enjoying the world of Asia and I believe we are learning a lot. We leave on Sunday 2/24 for Bangkok and then to Burma.



Tim in Thailand

Here are some thoughts and photos from my journal:

**Brutal dictatorship** – a phrase I have heard for years in the news. But these words take on a whole new meaning when I met so many children face to face who are displaced because of the oppression of the Burma government– caught in the crossfire of a government that is at war with its own people; a war for land and resources based on power and greed. So people are fleeing from violence and fleeing to refugee camps in Thailand. It is the Thai government that owns the land where the refugee camps are located and they regulate the camps. There is no septic system and limited access to water and electricity. Food is provided by relief agencies (like Partners) and the United Nations. I was reminded again at the racial animosity between the Thai people and the people of Burma. Honestly, I don't understand this. Indeed, I fail to grasp how some of the Thai people can be so cold-hearted toward their neighbors who are fleeing this sickening war.

#### Facts from the Partners Magazine 2008 (First Quarter)

- Burma's government spends 40% of their GNP on the military and 3% on healthcare
- In Karen State, there is no place to be treated for the common killer Tuberculosis
- There are 106 deaths for children under 5 years old for every 1000 births
- The daughter of the ruler of Burma (General Than Shwe) received 50 million dollars worth of gifts at her wedding in 2006. You can watch this on YouTube.
- The country spend \$137,000 on a program to combat AIDS and the World Health Organizations ranks Burma as having the world's second worst healthcare system. Only war-torn Sierra Leone is worse.
- An estimated 34% of Burma's rural populations have no access to clean water, which in turn, causes respiratory and water-born diseases.

The trip to the border city called Maesot was about 5 hours by car from Chiang Mai but Craig, Tim and I arrived safely in spite of the fact that our vehicle overheated right at the edge of the mountains. Upon arrival at the Mae La camp (another 40 minute drive), I was stunned at the small entrance to what some people have called the largest refugee camp in the world. We were greeted by Henry (a leader of section A) and about four other men including the Pastor of the church in the camp.



The camp is divided up into many different sections and we were only able to visit section A. Our journey began with a steep climb up a hill past the huts with thatched roofs where people lived. We were with Chris, the team leader from Partners, his brother-in-law from Switzerland and a photojournalist from the States named Sarah. We stopped to visit the children who were in school, a bamboo building divided into several classrooms.

We then had an elaborate lunch with Henry and learned from him about some of the situations in the camp. We met his young son Drew whom he said was named after Drew Barrymore. We met with several leaders of Section A inside Henry's house. All the houses (more like huts) are built on stilts. When the rainy season comes, the whole camp is a sea of mud. Then I got to interview five teenagers who had been living in the camp for several years. One after another, they told me their stories of being sent to the camp by their parents to flee the violence in their villages and to get an education because there is NO HOPE for any of them to get an education in Burma. They spoke of some of their hopes to become teachers and their dream of going to the US to study.

I am slowly grasping the short- and long terms effects of the on-going conflict that the Burma junta has with their own vulnerable people and the oppression that is forcing the people of Burma to flee their country to save their lives and the lives of the children. ON THE ONE SIDE of this story is the drama involved in those who are forced to leave their villages and run for their lives. Just today, I read a newsletter from a group called Free Burma Rangers ([freeburmarangers.org/](http://freeburmarangers.org/)) a group deeply supported by Partners. These folks go inside the jungles of Burma to provide medical care, supplies and hope to the people fleeing from the Burma Army in the Papun District. They have a satellite phone, computer and camera and can transmit right from the jungle. You can get a newsletter by visiting their web page. They write:

*We had met these families back in December, where they were hiding after being chased out of their village by Burma Army troops. We gave them some assistance then and they participated in the GLC (Good Life Club – John 10:10) program for mothers and children. Some of us also photographed and reported on the two new Burma Army camps that were built above their abandoned village. From these camps the Burma Army shells down into the surrounding rice fields (in November killing one of the villagers from this group). Also from these camps come patrols that shoot on site anyone they*

*find. In December, when we first met these people, they said they were trying to stay close to their farms. Now in February, they said they could not take it anymore and with the help of the Karen resistance (Karen National Union - a pro-democracy ethnic organization) they are trying to find a safer place to live. As we were talking with them and giving some help, one young 20 year old woman only looked down and seemed very sad. I asked her what she was feeling and she said she was so sad to leave her home, she did not want to leave her farm and that she was born there. It is the home she knows and loves and she doesn't want to leave it at all. We tried to comfort her and prayed with the group. We gave them some small help for food, treated one of the children who was hurt and they continued on their way.*

This situation became much more real to me through one of the short stories I read written by Oddny Gumaer, (one of the Founders of Partners) in her book Displaced Reflections. You can order this book through the Partners web site at [partnersworld.org](http://partnersworld.org). With her permission, here is an excerpt from one of her stories called Shooting at Kids from page 29:

Little Naw Eh Ywa Paw was 9 years old. In front of her was her dad. He was strong and fast. It appeared he was the leader of the group. He carried his old mother on his back. Behind Naw Eh Ywa Paw were her mother, her little sister and her baby brother, as well as the rest of the villagers who were escaping with them. They were running from soldiers with guns. Soldiers that wanted to kill them to remove them from their land. Up on a hill, Naw Eh Ywa Paw, her dad and grandmother met the soldiers and the barrels of their guns. Bang. Her dad and grandmother were killed at close range. Naw Eh Ywa Paw was shot in her stomach, but kept on running until she got help. The rest of the villagers were able to escape. They met a relief team that was able to take the bullet from Naw Eh Ywa Paw's stomach and treat her so that she was able to recover. They are still hiding in the jungle. There is no dad to watch over them and help provide for them. There is no grandma to help look after the children and tell goodnight stories. There is only the hope that they may be able to return to their home one day. But then, what kind of hope is that?

ON THE OTHER SIDE of this story are hundreds of thousands of people who are now inside Thailand living in refugee camps.



I live so far from war, from dictatorships and from the world of refugees both in distance and also in experience. Visiting the Mae La camp *feels* almost like visiting another planet – a place where the people are all there because they fled their homeland out of fear for their lives, where forced dependence is a way of life, where the children born there have never known another life and where they are not permitted to grow their own food. It is a place where the men feel despondent because there is nothing for them to

do. They cannot work, they cannot leave and they cannot provide for their families. In some ways, the camp is like a big outdoor prison where each family has its own house but in this case there are lots of additional children without parents. No one is allowed to leave the camp and visitors come only by permission. We were told that officially there are 42,000 people in the camp but unofficially the numbers range from 50-60 thousand. Half of these are children. This is a great injustice.



After lunch we sat down with a group of 5 young men and women (ages 15-18) and I interviewed them as Tim took some video. The conversation was difficult because the translator didn't know English very well. One after another, these young Burmese refugees talked to me about the horrific conditions in Burma and how they felt safe in the refugee camp. Each young person told me their dream to become a teacher one day, to travel and study in the United States and to help their own people. I was able to understand that every one of these young people (Tim's age) had left Burma because their parents sent them to this camp. The camp, as terrible as it was became the only option for these parents for their children's future. Following the interviews, we were invited to speak in a class of young children.



**Hospitality. So often on our trip, we were treated to an extravagant expression of hospitality by the people we met, a people who have so little. Each experience is humbling and also a life lesson that I hope I will continue to carry with me.**

When I was first told that there are some Burmese people who choose to live at the refugee camps in the hope that they will be selected to be re-settle to another country, I was shocked. This seems unbelievable. But as I learned more about the war and their fear and hopelessness, I began to understand why. When I visited Burma a few weeks ago, our translator told Kara Garrison and I that her sister went to live at the camp in the hope that they could be given permission to immigrate to another country. But I later learned that it could be a long as 10 years before their names come up on the list to leave – that is 10 years inside the camp with the HOPE of leaving. To think that the refugee camp is a better choice for some people than their current life situation makes me feel very sad.

Time and space do not allow me in this letter to talk about what I am learning about human dignity, hope, human rights – a right to be safe and a right to an education (a United Nations declaration for children), and the Karen people. In the future, I would like to write more about how a people robbed by war and the unjust lack of education do not allow their suffering to make them bitter. Indeed, I am very interested in why some suffering and oppressed people never become bitter. I want to talk about the lack of privacy, the need for blankets over toys, the lack of art in the camps and how the people put posters on their walls to create beauty, to insulate and to provide privacy. What must it be like to grow up in a place with no privacy? I want to write about domestic violence, the biggest social problem inside the camps. There is so much that can be said about the contrasting worlds I have experienced and how this journey awakens my soul to what matters in this life. On another day, I will write about landmines, bamboo housing and my feelings about the way the children looked at me when we visited. But that is another day.

Love is still a verb,

Keith

**May God bless you with discomfort**

at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships  
so that you may live deep within your heart

**May God bless you with anger**

at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people  
so that you may work for justice, freedom and peace

**May God bless you with tears**

to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger and war  
so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and  
to turn their pain into joy

**And may God bless you with enough foolishness**

to believe that you can make a difference in the world  
so that you can do what others claim cannot be done  
to bring justice and kindness to all our children and the poor.

- A Franciscan Benediction

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Here are a few web sites on Burma that I found informative if you'd like to explore more

[www.hillerphoto.com/burma](http://www.hillerphoto.com/burma)

[www.freeburmarangers.org/](http://www.freeburmarangers.org/)

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/correspondent/2151458.stm>

[www.partnersworld.org](http://www.partnersworld.org)

Please pray for the people of Burma. Please read Psalm 10

**Psalm 10**      **1** <sup>[a]</sup>Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? **2** In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises. **3** He boasts of the cravings of his heart; he blesses the greedy and reviles the LORD. **4** In his pride the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God. **5** His ways are always prosperous; he is haughty and your laws are far from him; he sneers at all his enemies. **6** He says to himself, "Nothing will shake me; I'll always be happy and never have trouble." **7** His mouth is full of curses and lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue. **8** He lies in wait near the villages; from ambush he murders the innocent, watching in secret for his victims. **9** He lies in wait like a lion in cover; he lies in wait to catch the helpless; he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net. **10** His victims are crushed, they collapse; they fall under his strength. **11** He says to himself, "God has forgotten; he covers his face and never sees. **12** Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless. **13** Why does the wicked man revile God? Why does he say to himself, "He won't call me to account"? **14** But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless. **15** Break the arm of the wicked and evil man; call him to account for his wickedness that would not be found out. **16** The LORD is King forever and ever; the nations will perish from his land. **17** You hear, O LORD, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, **18** defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more.

