

In Search of a Solution

by Karen A. Cheng
photos by Peter Lemieux

MAE SOT, THAILAND— There she stands with the rice, surrounded by 100 newly arrived immigrants from Burma. Lynn Yoshikawa, the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) field/program coordinator in this gritty town on the border with Burma, sits center stage with lives hanging in the balance.

Undeterred by fear of land mines or the likelihood that they will not be granted asylum, these migrants have traveled across Burma, starting from the state of Arakan in the west, and then waded the Moei River to reach Thailand. Finally, they have a chance to catch their breath, have a meal, and figure out the next step. This well-deserved break will be short

lived, however. Their journey has just begun.

At this point, there is no turning back to the life they have just fled—one filled with systematic violations of their human rights by the Burmese army. A quick read of the 2005 Burma Report by Human Rights Watch helps explain why: “Burma has more child soldiers than any other country in the world, and its forces have used extrajudicial execution, rape, torture, forced relocation of villages, and forced labor in campaigns against rebel groups.”

Re-entry or deportation to Burma portend misery in the form of lengthy prison terms, harsh labor camps, and, too often, lethal persecution. Yet their future in Thailand presents a new set of

harrowing obstacles and few trustworthy shepherds to guide the way.

Two more meals

This sweltering afternoon in Mae Sot, their eyes fix on Yoshikawa, a 26-year-old from Sacramento. Yoshikawa has just delivered the six bags of rice. Along with some curry, this will be one more dinner and breakfast. By the next morning, the group, with no work papers or job opportunities, will be on its own, fending for itself in a new country. Survival in this murky no-man’s land will be a tough task but one made easier if JRS can sustain its support. The group recognizes the high stakes of the pending decision Yoshikawa has to make. They scan her for any clue that might reveal

A fraction of the more than 1.5 million Burmese who have fled to Thailand to escape repression live in refugee camps. The majority, including these in a slum area in the border town Mae Sot, live wherever they can find space.



“At times you become numb to the pressure,” says Jesuit Refugee Service’s Lynn Yoshikawa. “You live in it, you live with it.” She responds 24/7 to a never-ending series of human crises in Mae Sot alone.

A Burmese migrant, passing the day on the bridge across the Moei River between Burma and Thailand, is drawn by a dim hope of a better life in Thailand.



The Jesuit Refugee Service struggles to assist Burmese asylum seekers in Thailand

her intentions and offer insight to one all-important question: Are they on the proverbial yellow brick road or the road to perdition?

Before she can answer the unspoken question, Yoshikawa’s cell phone rings—a constant occurrence when, as the primary JRS contact in this refugee hotbed, her phone number tops the list of first responders for migrants in crisis.

“Who’s been detained at the police station?” asks Yoshikawa, raising an eyebrow at the prospect of heightened tension on the other end of the line. “Chin people? . . . Why? . . . I’ll go there this afternoon.” Eyes follow Yoshikawa as she hops on her scooter and dashes off. This tough decision will have to wait. The next crisis looms. Yoshikawa is needed

center stage for another drama unfolding across town.

Complex and volatile

Such is a typical day for JRS in Mae Sot dealing with a Burmese refugee situation that is always complicated, never static, and frequently volatile. What is clear is that, according to a recent report filed by the International Rescue Committee and JRS, as many as 2 million Burmese live in Thailand. Of this group, approximately 140,000 live in the nine established refugee camps along the border. Less clear is how to track the thousands of asylum seekers who do not have the right to apply for asylum yet continue to flood over the border in droves. Once in Thailand, they play a waiting game in

a no-man’s land, stuck between a life in Burma fraught with human rights violations and a life in Thailand living illegally. For them, there is no simple solution; for JRS, there is a call to action.

Front lines

Any call to action requires foot soldiers on the ground to gather information, assess needs, and manage crises. Three years ago, Yoshikawa, the first Jesuit Refugee Service staffer in Mae Sot, arrived on the front lines to begin her work. She quickly learned not to have too many expectations in a crisis so unpredictable. “Once you believe you have a handle on how things work, things always change. The policy is always changing, the decision makers are changing, the



This rice, supplied by the Jesuit Refugee Service, was dinner and a breakfast for a group of 100 new refugees—no guarantees about the next meal. With no legal status in Thailand, no way to make a legitimate living, the refugees' best hope is costly: paying a smuggler to get them to another country.

faces of refugees are changing, and the migrants are changing.”

One constant is Yoshikawa's daily struggle to make life-altering decisions for others. Who deserves the rice? Who needs advocacy the most? And how do I help without furthering refugee dependency syndrome?

“At times you become numb to the pressure,” Yoshikawa admits. “You live in it, you live with it.”

There is never just one way to provide assistance in this complex environment, so the quest for JRS to find a durable solution demands constant evaluation and re-evaluation, a burden not shouldered by Yoshikawa alone.

Differing needs

In Thailand, JRS staffers number about 35 people in five cities. This team provides Burmese asylum seekers with a range of services, from education and counseling to legal aid and medical services. Still, among other nongovernmental organiza-

tions (NGOs) in the field, JRS is relatively small . . . and likes it that way.

Explained Yoshikawa in late March 2006, “There's more power in being smaller and flexible. It's hard to plan five years out when you don't know what the policies will be in one week if [Thai Prime Minister] Thaksin Shinawatra is pushed out of power.” (On April 4, 2006, he stepped down from office after prolonged public protests.)

Such flexibility proved critical when on January 6, 2004, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), without any advance notice and under strong pressure from the Thai government, suddenly halted the registration of any new Burmese arrivals to Thailand. Before, the Thai government made exceptions for certain Burmese asylum seekers who feared for their lives in Burma; it established nine refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border to provide a “temporary” place for these refugees while their cases awaited review and refugee-status registration.



Yoshikawa, head of the JRS office in Mae Sot, prepares applications for Burmese asylum seekers. A California native, she needs the services of Armstrong, her translator.

Few places to turn

But since registration was halted, asylum seekers have had nowhere to turn except to an organization such as JRS. Tom Coughlin, JRS Thailand Director based in Bangkok, described the situation: “There are many NGOs operating in Mae Sot, but there are no durable solutions. It’s very hard. People are caught in a tangle. We need a program to deal with ongoing vulnerability.” And vulnerable the migrants are.

Officially, Burmese migrants without proper documentation cannot be employed or live in Thailand legally if they are not registered. Displaced, undocumented, and with no immediate means to improve their current situation, they are easy prey for human traffickers who promise, often falsely and always at high expense, a better future elsewhere. And fear of deportation by the Thai authorities is an unnerving constant of their daily life.

Historically, according to Coughlin, the Thai government has taken a practical and humane approach toward Burmese asylum seekers. Coughlin reminds the naysayers, “The Thai government is housing approximately 140,000 refugees in camps, has legalized 1.2 million migrant workers without forcing them out of the country, and, even as recently as the fourth quarter of 2005, accepted a

group of 18,000 Burmese asylum seekers identified by the United Nations . . . which allowed them to live in the camps and to gain eligibility for resettlement legally elsewhere.”

That said, Coughlin would like to see the UNHCR, with the support of the Thai government, reopen registration for asylum seekers and the Thai government allow new arrivals to register for work permits at a reasonable cost. “That way,” he explains, “they can be identified and tracked, so that we’ll at least know who they are.”

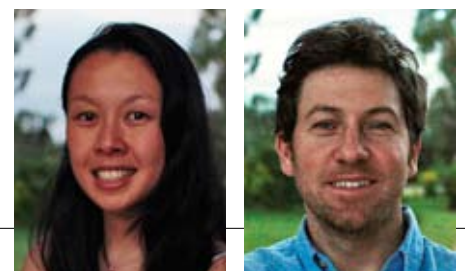
A graduate of the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., Coughlin also sees a critical role for the international community, particularly the United States, to play in the resettlement issue. A side effect of the USA PATRIOT Act, which was created “to deter and punish terrorist acts,” is that the situation of legitimate refugees has become more difficult. According to an article in the March 6, 2006 *New York Times*, “9,500 Burmese refugees scheduled to be resettled in the United States from Thailand are in limbo because their direct support for armed rebels opposed to their repressive government has put them in technical violation of American anti-terrorism law.” Without an amendment to the USA PATRIOT Act, the United States resettlement process could grind to a halt

and leave long-term negative effects on refugee policy.

Coughlin cautions that “if the United States, the largest destination for resettlement in the world, stops resettling refugees, it will lose its credibility and influence with other Southeast Asian countries on refugee policy. And the Thai government will feel more emboldened to deal more harshly with refugees.”

While JRS Thailand keeps a close eye on the big picture of refugee policy, it does not lose sight of the source of its credibility—listening to the voices of the refugees it serves.

Back in Mae Sot, while the 100 new arrivals contemplate their next move, Yoshikawa continues to work behind the scenes, on the ground, and on center stage for their benefit. She might not be able to offer an answer as to which path they are on, but she will advocate for them on the next steps of their long journey. ■



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